

HIGH TIME WE STEP UP RELATIONS WITH MYANMAR

India's ongoing challenges along its border have taken a new turn this time involving Myanmar. Recently, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar [met his counterpart](#) from Myanmar, Than Swe. This was followed by Indian Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane's [visit to Myanmar](#) in early July. These recent meetings signify the importance of addressing these concerns and finding a long-term solution for complications of tranquillity in border areas and illegal transborder movements or crimes such as drug trafficking and smuggling as well as ethnic clashes along border areas, as discussed by the dignitaries.

IMPACT OF THE 2021 MILITARY COUP AND CROSS-BORDER CHALLENGES

These issues have been heightened following the violence in Myanmar ever since the 2021 Military coup. As recently as April 2023 the country's armed forces [dropped multiple bombs](#) on a gathering in Pazigy, a village in Sagaing Region, killing around 100 people. Meanwhile, the Indian state of Manipur bordering Myanmar is also experiencing ethnic violence with clashes between the Meitei and Kuki communities, with over 142 deaths on record. Along with this over 4000 weapons have also been stolen from the police armouries. It is also suspected that the weapons might have [reached militants](#) in Myanmar since a top cop shared that it is impossible for any community to store and conceal such large-scale weapons.

It's not just the cross-border movement of drugs and weapons but some Meitei leaders claim that the Kuki rebels have entered Manipur from Myanmar while the Kuki representatives defended the claim maintaining that the cross-border movement was peaceful. The two groups also argued about poppy cultivation in Kuki areas of Manipur with the Meitei leaders accusing Myanmar of financing it. In contrast, the Kuki leaders countered it by stating that it's funded by the Meitei cartels. Even so, insurgents in Manipur have operated from Myanmar

The talks and discussions with Myanmar's Junta are important since as per the United Nations, ever since the military coup took place, India has sent more weaponry to the Junta. However, Indian representatives told UN rapporteur Andrews that the arms supplied were a part of previous commitments made with the civilian govt, pre-coup. They also added that they were

[exported](#) in light of New Delhi's own domestic security concerns. It is however clear that India needs Myanmar's cooperation on border and connectivity issues and wants to reduce Myanmar's dependence on China and the steps taken might contribute towards it but it is still stoking the very violence that poses a risk to India.

In their campaign to consolidate their power, the Junta have been using aerial attacks as a common tactic. Previously, the Indian village of Farkawan witnessed two bombs being dropped on the Indian side of the border as per locals. This happened while they were on a campaign to destroy Camp Victoria in Myanmar's Chin State since this camp serves as the headquarters of the Chin National Army, an ethnic armed group fighting to restore democracy in Myanmar. Their training camp is just a few kilometres from the border with India.

Along with the smuggling of weapons and supplies, medicines are also smuggled along this route to support the rebels fighting in Myanmar. Apart from this, reports suggest that over 40,000 people have crossed over to India to flee violence and are living in refugee camps. Injured rebels also often cross over for treatment. The 2021 coup which led to a large number of refugees entering India is also considered as a trigger for the near civil war-like violence that is rocking the northeastern state of Manipur. One of the reasons if not the main reason for this violence is that the Meitei community fears that the arrival of the refugees, especially the Chin Tribe who share ethnic lineage with the Kuki community will outnumber the Meitei community. This ethnic violence has also resulted in about 10,000+ homes being set [ablaze](#)

THE MENACE OF DRUG TRAFFICKING

Additionally, [drug trafficking](#) has emerged as a pressing concern in the region. Manipur's Chief Minister N. Biren Singh recently shared that satellite imagery has detected large-scale cultivation of opium in the forests and hills of Manipur. Over 18,000 acres of poppy cultivation have been [destroyed](#) so far since 2017 thus affecting the narcotics drug lord's businesses and further angering them. Drug lords fear that if peace returns in the state, it will only intensify the crackdown on the production of drugs since it might then be a major focus. The produce is usually also smuggled to Myanmar before being processed to produce heroin and smuggled to other south-east Asian countries. There are also drugs that are smuggled into India via Myanmar. Indian village of Moreh is a drug hub. Drugs reach this village from Myanmar's

Tamu Village. It is then sent to Imphal and other such major hubs. Ever since the 2021 coup, the drug trade only increased. Reports suggest that Heroin seizures increased from 20.36 Kg in 2020 to 34.52 Kg in 2022. This is not just a threat to human security but also to social welfare. Most of the insurgent groups receive financial assistance from drug cartels that mainly operate outside of the Indian territory.

VULNERABLE BORDERS AND SECURITY CONCERNS

Less than 10% of Manipur's border with Myanmar is fenced. This makes it easy for the militants to infiltrate into Manipur. Both the Meitei and Kuki community have their own extremist groups like the Kuki revolutionary army and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) respectively. With the difficult terrain in the border areas and also the current violence in Manipur it's easy for these groups to hide. Recently, the Indian Govt sought a detailed report from Assam Rifles on how "at least 718 Myanmar nationals crossed the border into India in just two days, without any proper travel documents" and also issued a pushback directive.

However it doesn't just stop at this, it also comes down to China's "[Strings Of Pearls](#)" policy since the lesser India intervenes, the more China does. China is already involved in many infrastructure projects like the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. For China, it's just another access point to the Indian Ocean.

Instability in the region of Manipur and Myanmar is unfavourable for India's [internal security](#) and although the immediate remedy for ethnic violence lies within India, in the long run, India will need to address Myanmar. As both nations navigate the aftermath of the 2021 military coup, violence and instability in Myanmar continues to have a far-reaching impact on India's internal security. By advancing diplomatic relations and cooperation we can not only work together on combating issues like drug trafficking or risking having an impact on our internal security but also strengthen our economy and regional position by working towards long pending projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral highway. In tandem with India's "Look East" and "Act East" policies, these engagements provide compelling reasons to strengthen our relations with Myanmar, fostering stability, prosperity, and harmonious regional ties.