



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG POLICY NOTE

Coup in Myanmar: Principal Actors and Possible Scenarios

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Southeast Asian leaders met Myanmar's top general Min Aung Hlaing in an emergency ASEAN Summit in Jakarta, Indonesia on April 24, 2021. Source: Associated Press

Myanmar's Senior General and coup leader Min Aung Hlaing arrives in Indonesia for an emergency ASEAN Summit, April 24, 2021. Source: Associated Press

Anti-coup protesters march along a street in Yangon on the occasion of the emergency ASEAN Summit, April 24, 2021. Source: Associated Press

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Contents

Principal Actors: Strengths and Weaknesses	2
Possible Scenarios.....	4
Scenario 1: Tatmadaw Consolidates.....	4
Scenario 2: Split in the Tatmadaw.....	6
Scenario 3: Restoration of Civilian Government.....	7
Scenario 4: State Collapse	9
Conclusion: Implications for India	10

Coup in Myanmar: Principal Actors and Possible Scenarios

by

Sanjay Pulipaka and Mohit Musaddi

In a coup on February 1, 2021, Myanmar's military (Tatmadaw) overthrew the democratically elected government and arrested the top political leadership, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. The Tatmadaw cited voter fraud in the November 2020 elections as the primary reason for the military takeover. Following the coup, the country has been plunged into chaos, with country wide protests and violence. Myanmar's youth is at the forefront of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), in which government personnel, medical staff and police have also joined. In opposition to the Tatmadaw's State Administrative Council (SAC), Myanmar's ousted Parliament members have formed the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). The CRPH has announced [four goals](#), namely, end military dictatorship; ensure the unconditional release of all unlawful detainees; achieve full-fledged democracy and rescind the 2008 Constitution; and write a new Constitution based on a federal system.

On April 16, the CRPH formed the [National Unity Government of Myanmar](#), which will serve as an interim governing body and work towards a federal democratic future. While there has been global condemnation of the coup, particularly by the US, the EU, and other Western democracies, China has been leaning towards the military regime to protect both its strategic and business interests.

In light of the above discussion, this exercise looks at the principal actors that will shape the future course of governance in Myanmar and the possible scenarios with their implications. The exercise is important from the Indian perspective as developments in Myanmar have implications for the stability of the north-east, regional connectivity and growing Chinese footprints.

Principal Actors: Strengths and Weaknesses

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Tatmadaw	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Most powerful institution, which has directly and indirectly ruled the country. ➤ Strong organisational base with significant manpower ➤ Strong relations with China and Russia. ➤ Exercises control over various natural resources in Myanmar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Excessive use of force as a tool of intimidation and governance ➤ Can run an authoritarian government, which will imperil economic growth, further increasing popular alienation ➤ Growing challenge to legitimacy, both from within and externally
Democracy Activists (NLD, CDM and Others)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ NLD has repeatedly demonstrated its organisational prowess, resulting in electoral victories. ➤ CDM has gained significant support across all sections of population, with youth leading from the front. The work boycott by government servants is also gaining momentum ➤ Have international legitimacy and sympathy, especially from the Western liberal democracies ➤ Can convince their supporters in the West to deploy punitive economic and diplomatic measures against the Tatmadaw ➤ Ability to deploy new digital technologies to put forward alternative narratives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Absence of national political figures other than Suu Kyi. ➤ Lack of co-ordination with various ethnic groups, resulting in weak momentum. ➤ Limited capacity to prevent resource flow to the military ➤ Limited ability to influence the behaviour of China, the principal supporter of the military. ➤ West support largely through sanctions and supportive statements.

<p>Buddhist Organisations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The Sangha is viewed with veneration ➤ They have the ability to undermine the legitimacy of various political actors through the deployment of religious symbols. ➤ Strong presence in Buddhist-dominated regions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ There are questions as to whether the Sangha is a cohesive force. Some hardline groups are leaning towards the military, while others seem to be inclined towards the democracy movement.
<p>Ethnic Armed Groups</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Some of the armed organisations such as the Kachin Independence Army and the United Wa State command a large number of militias ➤ Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) have demonstrated the ability to withstand the coercive tactics of the Myanmar military ➤ Ability to draw support from a diverse set of international actors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Demonstrated inability of EAOs to work as a cohesive unit, including lack of mutual trust. ➤ Persistent challenges in terms of resource generation. While some of these groups control various natural resources, they are not sufficient to contest the Tatmadaw's military might. ➤ There is support for EAOs' demands for greater political autonomy for ethnic groups, but there is very little support for secessionist tendencies.

Possible Scenarios¹

Scenario 1: Tatmadaw Consolidates

Process/Method

- ❖ Leverage force for intimidation and consolidation
- ❖ Weak regional response enables deployment of harsh domestic measures to contain protests. Chinese support will help Tatmadaw to withstand international criticism
- ❖ Use election card to gain ASEAN support
- ❖ Attempt to co-opt at least two or three major armed groups.
- ❖ [Use a section](#) of Buddhist monks to gain support for military rule in the name of national stability.

Feasibility

- ❖ The military junta can endure for a limited period but only with significant Chinese support. This will have a profound political, economic and social impact, with deep repercussions for the population. Protests could intensify with the participation of Buddhist monks. CDM will persist, depending upon the mood of the nation and economic situation. Political instability will persist in the near term.
- ❖ A decade of semi-democratic rule, relatively more open media, and enhanced interaction with the external world have diluted the belief that military rule is necessary to protect the country's territorial integrity. As a consequence, voices supporting the military rule are few and protests are more intense. This will make the consolidation of military rule difficult.

Consequences

- ❖ Uncertainty will continue.
- ❖ The military has already indicated that it will not hold elections within a year and therefore may have to face further sanctions and other punitive measures, especially from the West.

¹ The numbering of the scenarios does not indicate the probability of occurrence

- ❖ China's support will result in its enhanced economic footprint and will also provide the military time to negotiate with CDM on its terms and shape a future constitutional process that is favourable to it. During his conversation with the Thai and Brunei Foreign Ministers on April 22, Chinese FM Wang Yi called for a "soft landing of the situation in Myanmar" which can be interpreted as growing Chinese support to the military.
- ❖ Russia will co-ordinate its policy with China's and will continue to provide tacit support.
- ❖ ASEAN will make pronouncements but will take little action under the cloak of ASEAN unity. Since some ASEAN countries do not qualify as full and robust democracies, there is little consensus for concerted action against the Tatmadaw.
- ❖ India's economic engagement will get stymied. [Adani Ports](#) (APSE.NS) has been removed from the S&P Sustainability index due to alleged ties with the military. The Adani episode demonstrates that international scrutiny will have severe and immediate consequences for companies/firms that operate out of democratic countries. Indian firms seeking to scale up operations will be subjected to demands to scale down investments. Therefore, no big investments (with the exception of China) are likely in the near future. This will further consolidate China's hold on the economy.
- ❖ The growing closeness between China and the Tatmadaw may provide Beijing with a greater foothold in the Bay of Bengal region. China may revive its interest in the Dawei port in the Tanintharyi Region (close to the Myanmar-Thailand border), which will have long-term security implications for the region.



Scenario 2: Split in the Tatmadaw

Process/Method

- ❖ Deteriorating economic situation and possible disruption in financial flows may create conditions for factionalism in the Myanmar military. There is also a possibility of the younger cadres distancing themselves from the leadership as they see a bleak future.
- ❖ Rebel officers could [support](#) the CDM, as the NLD has not undermined the legitimate interests of the Tatmadaw, defended the military on international platforms, and has not dramatically reduced the defence budget or salaries of military personnel. Moreover, Suu Kyi has the aura of being the daughter of Aung San; the younger generation military families have been exposed to open societies and reaped the benefits of a relatively more open political system.
- ❖ In the case of growing factionalism, ethnic armed groups will seek greater leverage by taking sides with one of the factions.

Feasibility

- ❖ The likely emergence of factionalism within the Tatmadaw is low because the military is a very disciplined force. However, if we take history as evidence, it is a remote possibility, but cannot be ruled out. Earlier transitions have resulted in a consolidation of the military rather than giving space for a democratic movement.

Consequences

- ❖ Multiple coups in a short time could raise the spectre of civil war, grave instability and severe economic crisis.
- ❖ If the rebel groups and democratic forces fail to maintain the initiative, it will result in a humanitarian crisis. Such a crisis poses a bigger challenge for India with an outflow of refugees, which may prompt instability in northeast India.

Scenario 3: Restoration of Civilian Government

Process/Method

- ❖ Growing international pressure and concerns about a possible internal rift may prompt the military leadership to restore the civilian government under the banner of “guided democracy”, where seats in Parliament continue to be reserved for the military.
- ❖ Tatmadaw will bargain for assurances that there will be no prosecution or retributions for violations of human rights.
- ❖ The military may press for fresh elections to be held in a year or two.
- ❖ International (e.g. ASEAN) or domestic actors (monks) facilitate an agreement.
- ❖ However, the scenario is premised on the notion that all stakeholders agree to a give-and-take approach.

Feasibility

- ❖ This could be an important pathway to restore normalcy. However, given the recent violence/loss of life, reconciliation between the democracy activists and the military will be a challenging enterprise.
- ❖ Co-ordinated domestic and international pressure may create necessary conditions for a favourable outcome.
- ❖ Rigorous and sustained attempts at reconciliation, like that by Indonesia, and pressures such as the recent ASEAN emergency summit may create mechanisms for negotiations. While the opposition National Unity Government welcomed the [five-point consensus](#) reached during the ASEAN Summit on April 24, it is only by building on these steps that favourable conditions can be created for resolution of the crisis.
- ❖ Buddhist organisations have condemned the violence but can also play an important role.
- ❖ Myanmar military may have two demands, (1) protection from prosecution for violations of human rights; (2) dilution of the CRPH announcement that the [2008 Constitution is null and void](#) (as a new Constitution may lead to the military losing their reserved seats in the

Parliament). The democracy activists will find it extremely hard to accede to both the requests.

- ❖ The Quad countries can lean on ASEAN to pressure the Myanmar military to agree to a negotiated settlement. The Quad may also declare that restoration of representative government will bring in enhanced investments, which are in the interest of all stakeholders.

Consequences

- ❖ Reduction in the immediate ongoing violence
- ❖ In case the 2008 constitution is discarded, the civilian government will have to quickly come up with a working constitution or model for governance; there may be demands for conducting fresh elections under the new framework. In this regard, the CRPH has already announced that a National Unity Government has been formed, which will move forward on the basis of a new Federal Democratic Charter.

Scenario 4: State Collapse

Process/Method

- ❖ An unrepentant Tatmadaw refuses to give up power. Increase in violence leads to severe social and economic disruptions.
- ❖ Pitched battles between protestors and Tatmadaw cadres intensify, leading to further violence.
- ❖ Close to two dozen ethnic armed groups seek to assert control over larger territories.
- ❖ Significant out-migration, resulting in a rapid decline in economic productivity.

Feasibility

- ❖ Myanmar has often experienced long periods of instability, but has never been a failed state as the Tatmadaw was able to assert control in areas under its supervision. Nonetheless, given the current dynamics, the possibility of a state collapse could become a reality if (1) there is a complete collapse of the legitimacy of the Tatmadaw as an important institution in the governance framework, (2) the governance paralysis threatens to derail the [economic/financial system](#) and (3) ethnic armed groups make efforts to [assert](#) greater control.

Consequences

- ❖ The EAOs will become strong in the ethnic areas, resulting in fragmented sovereignty.
- ❖ There will be a spill over impact in terms of the proliferation of small arms from neighbouring countries.
- ❖ This may also lead to a refugee crisis for neighbours such as India. India's connectivity projects in the region may get derailed. With Afghanistan threatening to fall apart and Myanmar adding to the instability, the overall security scenario for India will be grim.
- ❖ China will seek to protect its economic interests by its influence over the Tatmadaw and some select armed groups. China is already building the [Southern Great Wall](#) along its border with Myanmar and may scale up construction. Beijing may also work with some EAOs to stem the flow of refugees into China. Notwithstanding any or all of the above, Beijing's investments will also be hampered.
- ❖ ASEAN will lose credibility for failing to prevent state collapse of a member-state.

Conclusion: Implications for India

In the evolving situation in Myanmar, there are not many favourable scenarios for India. Any shifts in Indian policy towards Myanmar will have to factor-in the peace and stability of Northeast India, cross-border kinship, concerns about demographic shifts in border states, the presence of Indian insurgent groups in Myanmar and other non-traditional security concerns such as the flow of narcotics.

India's best interests are served if Myanmar's political and economic realms are defined by a multiplicity of political players as well as economic actors. The most optimal scenario will be if the civilian government is restored resulting in prolonged political stability. India should lean on ASEAN to take robust steps to resolve the crisis.

If the Tatmadaw consolidates control and emerges as the only actor in Myanmar's political process, it will move closer to China to balance punitive measures from the West. This will create twin problems for India. At one level, in order to preserve its security and economic interests, India will have little option but to engage with the Tatmadaw. On the other hand, it may have to face punitive measures, largely from the West, as the Adani episode has demonstrated. India will have to factor both the security and economic costs of engaging with the Tatmadaw.

In case of either a split in Tatmadaw or an imminent state collapse, India will have to push all actors for reconciliation. Engagement with ethnic groups to ensure that there is no significant spill over into Indian territory will be an imperative. In case of a state collapse, India should work to ensure that Quad countries and ASEAN have robust institutional co-ordination mechanisms to address the crisis and consequent large-scale violence. To start with, the ASEAN Special Envoy should have regular conversations with India and other friends of Myanmar and should provide periodic updates regarding the mediation process. Inflow of refugees will be another issue for which India will need to brace up. A fairly large number of international organisations will move into Myanmar and neighbouring countries in case of a state collapse. India should have a robust plan to work with international organisations to ensure that aid to civilians is disbursed in a co-ordinated manner. All efforts should be made to ensure that in case of a state collapse in Myanmar, the impact on India's Northeast is manageable.



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