

A progressive Indian policy on Myanmar outlined

Three years on, the military in Myanmar, which overthrew the elected civilian government in February 2021, continues to kill, maim and displace its own people. India has steadfastly maintained formal relations with this regime, which has so far murdered more than 5,000 people and displaced some 2.5 million people. In its second tenure, the Narendra Modi government did very little to engage with the pro-democracy resistance, which now has both political and military wings. Indian foreign policy scholars and practitioners have doggedly defended this policy by arguing that India needs to work with the junta if it has to protect its "interests" in Myanmar and not get swayed by an idealistic preoccupation with "values".

How India can step out of China's shadow

But, in foreign policy, there is no clear line between "values" and "interests" simply because neither has a standard definition. It all depends on how a country defines these terms. This is also the case with India's Myanmar policy. New Delhi has long defined its "interests" in the Southeast Asian country in narrow strategic terms. But now, it needs to leverage a unique set of "values" to better defend its interests. It is possible for India to put in place a more progressive, values-driven Myanmar policy that works in favour, and not against, its national interests.

This new policy should have two key pivots, namely, democracy and human security. The new National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, therefore, needs to take four interlocking steps immediately.

First, India needs to use its credentials as the largest federal democracy in the region to sharpen its influence in Myanmar. For long, Myanmar's pro-democracy political elites and civil society have looked up to India as a model of a federal democratic union with a well-oiled power-sharing arrangement between the centre and various subnational units. This is even more relevant today as the democratic resistance in Myanmar, which is led by the National Unity Government (NUG), dozens of ethnic revolutionary organisations, civil society organisations, and trade unions, strives to replace the military-drafted 2008 constitution with a



Angshuman Choudhury

New Delhi-based researcher and writer from Assam, and formerly an Associate Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research

New Delhi's stance of defining its 'interests' in the Southeast Asian country in narrow strategic terms needs to change

federal constitution. By helping this vibrant opposition achieve its aim through capacity-building and knowledge exchange programmes, India can distinguish itself from China, its primary regional competitor in Myanmar. Both Beijing and New Delhi can sell military hardware to Myanmar, but only India can sell the spirit of federal cooperation. Here is a chance for the new Indian government to outmanoeuvre the Chinese in their own 'backyard'.

Weapons sales and humanitarian outreach

Second, India needs to immediately halt all weapon sales to the Myanmar military. According to the advocacy group, Justice For Myanmar (JFM), Indian state-owned military hardware manufacturers have sold a range of non-lethal and semi-lethal equipment to the junta since the 2021 coup. In its most recent report, published on March 27, the group claimed that on January 2, the Indian Air Force transferred a package which had 52 items, including navigation and communication parts, to its Myanmar counterpart. Another recent investigation by Frontier Myanmar claims that India sold more than \$1.5 million worth of navy-grade diesel to junta-linked entities since the coup. New Delhi needs to immediately put a stop to these, as the Myanmar military continues to use all its three services – the army, air force, and navy – to attack non-combatant civilians using imprecise lethal tactics.

Third, India needs to immediately open cross-border humanitarian corridors to help civilians affected by the conflict along three border provinces – Sagaing Region, Chin State and northern Rakhine State. According to United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) data, Sagaing Region has seen the largest quantum of internal displacement in all of Myanmar since the coup (as of March 25, 2024). Rakhine comes next, while Chin State sits tenth in the list. Continuing air strikes by the junta and clashes between armed groups in these areas have only pushed more civilians across the borders. New Delhi needs to first revoke its plans to fence the India-Myanmar border and reinstate the Free Movement Regime,

or the FMR, which the Union Home Ministry suspended in February 2024. Then, it should engage existing humanitarian aid networks along the India-Myanmar border to send emergency relief assistance including medicines, food and tarpaulin to the other side. Mizoram, where a multi-layered asylum and aid ecosystem is already operational, is a good starting point. India should also collaborate with local and international non-governmental organisations with experience in the field. Best practices from Thailand, which recently started cross-border aid deliveries into Myanmar, should also be adopted. New Delhi should use its clout to ensure that the aid is not distributed by the junta, which not only has a disastrous track record in this field, but is also not even in control of large areas along the India-Myanmar border. It is also possible to run cross-border aid corridors without allowing contraband to pass through, with stringent checks and pre-delivery vetting.

Detention of asylum seekers

Fourth, the Narendra Modi government should immediately halt the detention and deportation of asylum seekers from Myanmar. This is especially so in the case of Manipur, where the BJP-led government has so far deported 115 asylum seekers to Myanmar – the latest round was on June 11. These are people who entered India not because they wanted to or with mal-intent, but because they were forced to. Regardless of the fact that India has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, it is incumbent upon the government to treat them as refugees in need of humanitarian assistance and protection rather than as "illegal immigrants". Both the Indian Constitution and international law allow the Indian state to do so. In fact, the customary international legal principle of non-refoulement discourages India from deporting refugees back to a home country where they face a threat of persecution or death. The Centre should also urge the BJP-led Assam government to release the 27 Chin refugees detained in the State and house them in a humane refugee shelter.

India, the "Vishwabandhu", routinely claims to stand with the people of Myanmar. It should now walk the talk.

Question -1) According to the passage, why does India need to reconsider its Myanmar policy?

- To align more closely with China's geopolitical strategies.
- To prioritize federal cooperation over military hardware sales.
- To increase diplomatic tensions with neighboring countries.
- To maintain its status as a federal democratic union.

Question -2) What is one step proposed in the passage for India to distinguish itself from China in its Myanmar policy?

- Selling advanced military technology to Myanmar.
- Increasing diplomatic pressure on the Myanmar junta.
- Supporting Myanmar's pro-democracy movement.
- Suspending all diplomatic relations with Myanmar.



Question -3) According to the passage, why does India need to stop weapon sales to Myanmar immediately?

- A. To protect its military secrets from foreign adversaries.
- B. To comply with international sanctions against Myanmar.
- C. To prevent the Myanmar military from further attacks on civilians.
- D. To reduce its military spending budget.

Question -4) Which humanitarian measure does the passage suggest India should take regarding Myanmar?

- A. Setting up military bases along the India-Myanmar border.
- B. Establishing stricter border controls to prevent illegal immigration.
- C. Opening cross-border humanitarian corridors for displaced civilians.
- D. Providing financial aid to the Myanmar military for infrastructure development.

Question -5) What legal principle does the passage mention to argue against the deportation of asylum seekers from Myanmar?

- A. The principle of sovereign immunity.
- B. The doctrine of separation of powers.
- C. The customary international law principle of non-refoulement.
- D. The principle of territorial integrity.

Question -6) According to the passage, what distinguishes India's potential Myanmar policy from China's approach?

- A. India's focus on military expansion in the region.
- B. India's adherence to democratic values and federal cooperation.
- C. India's promotion of authoritarian regimes.
- D. India's economic sanctions against Myanmar.

Thank you for attempting!!!

[CLICK HERE](#) to join our telegram channel