**Myanmar-Bangladesh military ties**

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Myanmar and Bangladesh’s military ties can stabilise the whole region of Southeast Asia. A power shift in Myanmar and the subsequent polarisation among major powers triggered a new geopolitical flashpoint in Bangladesh’s strategic backyard, which the latter cannot afford to ignore. It seems that the US and other western countries are taking a heavy-handed approach while other big powers, such as Russia, China, India, and Japan, have started explicitly (or covertly) normalising their relations with the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military). Myanmar always gets priority in Bangladesh’s economic and security strategy. Although democratic Bangladesh has a moral dilemma in supporting the military government, it has yet to formally condemn the military coup or demand Aung San Su Kyi’s release. It underscores Dhaka’s careful support for the junta’s “one-Myanmar government policy.” So, in foreign policy circles, the immediate discussion is whether Dhaka’s stance is a “well-thought-out approach or simply a premature polarisation.”
In-depth analysis suggests that Bangladesh’s stance has stemmed from some very specific strategic considerations. First, Bangladesh is well aware that sanctions and condemnation, a typical western practice, are counterproductive in Myanmar as long as China and Russia continue to extend their diplomatic and military shields. Second, the previous NLD government failed to facilitate Dhaka’s long-expected connectivity, border security, or Rohingya crisis issues. Third, Dhaka seeks to develop cosy relations with Myanmar’s army based on non-confrontational and non-interference approach. So, it doesn’t want to enrage the Tatmadaw by taking part in a smear campaign that would not even address the country’s core security concerns.
Given the rapidly changing geo-political dynamics, it is not strange to predict that major powers like China, India, Russia, and Japan will remain on Myanmar’s military side, underlining their own strategic narratives. It will undoubtedly give the military a chance to consolidate its grip on the country as well as its diplomatic status and military position. With a recent resumption in diplomatic exchanges, China is warming up its historical “Pauk-Phaw” (sibling) ties with Myanmar. It has begun to normalise relations with the State Administration Council, mainly to secure its strategic infrastructure projects that would give Beijing a vital gateway to the Indian Ocean. Despite the fact that Russia, one of Myanmar’s largest arms suppliers, has no pressing geostrategic imperatives in Myanmar, it has been trying to diversify its cooperation with the country to increase its investment portfolio. Besides, the China-Russia axis is expected to play a more active role in the centre of the Indo-Pacific to offset expanding western dominance. Although India and Japan, two QUAD allies, feel uncomfortable doing business with a military regime, they will avoid the West-centric coercive measures and instead follow a “twin-track diplomacy” to engage with military administrations as well as pro-democracy forces. Apparently, the key strategic reason for this stance is to avoid alienating Myanmar and pushing it towards China’s lap.
No doubt, finding an early and sustainable solution to the Rohingya crisis is a “top priority” issue for Bangladesh right now. But policy analysts acknowledge that this protracted issue has become more complicated and would require a “consultative and constructive approach” between the two governments, along with international stakeholders. In this case, Bangladesh would have to deal with the Myanmar military even if it is governed by people’s representatives because the 2008 Constitution places the military in a central position in the government with complete authority over the ministries of defence, home, and border affairs. Another main strategic objective of Bangladesh is to materialise its look-east policy by connecting itself with China and the ASEAN countries via Myanmar. Bangladesh has also been eyeing joining the ASEAN bloc and the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway initiative. Therefore, Bangladesh ought to convince Myanmar’s central government to draw up plans for access to each other’s markets as well as regional markets to face the post-LDC challenges.
Despite past strained ties, Bangladesh’s military chiefs have traditionally paid goodwill visits to Myanmar, seeking to develop a more meaningful relationship from a security standpoint. What is important to note is that Bangladesh was among only eight countries that sent their defence attaché to attend the Myanmar Armed Forces Day parade in Naypyitaw in March 2021, a month after the coup, prompting Min Aung Hlaing to consider Dhaka one of its allies. In a nutshell, Bangladesh is trying to reorient its Myanmar policy in light of the regional power setting and the army’s new rule in Naypyidaw. Pursuing a multi-dimensional approach of engagement with the Myanmar govt. and convincing them to address security concerns could be a viable strategic option for Bangladesh right now.