



Myanmar Political Crisis: Internal Issue or Regional Issue in Southeast Asia

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Economics

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Background

Following the military coup in 2021, Myanmar has suffered upscale human rights violations, political and economic instability. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, over 27,000 individuals were detained by the military and 5945 people were killed by the junta since the military coup (AAPP, 2024). As of 2024 October, the mass killings by military were up to 465 numbers and over 1000 airstrikes against civilians were conducted (OHCHR & ISP Myanmar, 2024). Declaration of defensive war by revolution forces, and confrontation with Ethnic Resistance Organizations; the military is being dismantled its control over territories. Moreover, Myanmar people have been struggling with inflation, purchasing public goods at high prices, shortage of commodities goods and low labour wages. (World Bank, 2023). In February 2024, the military enforced the conscription law in Myanmar, forcing young men to serve in the military. Although international communities and human rights criticize the junta, the tyranny is still going for human rights abuses within the country. According to the United Nations, 18.6 million people in Myanmar needed humanitarian assistance and more than three million of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has risen to as of 16 August 2024.

Response of International community in Myanmar Political Crisis

The situation in Myanmar crisis is becoming exacerbated as the upscaling of human rights violations and urging for humanitarian assistance within the country. As the country has been facing serious crimes against humanity, the international community remarked on the Myanmar political crisis in different ways. Notably, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that “China opposes the external intervention regarding Myanmar’s internal affairs” in a visit to Myanmar (Xinhua, 2024). Moreover, China and Russia rejected the statement of condemnation at the United Nations Security Council at the beginning of the coup. Just a few days after the coup, Biden government sanctioned Myanmar military personnel including Min Aung Hlaing and indicated it was an “assault to rule of law and democracy” (US Department of Treasury, 2021). The United States, The United Kingdom and Western alliance assert that escalation of violence and violation of Human Rights law in Myanmar are deeply concerned for the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar (Joint Statement, 2024). Japan used the term strongly condemned and showed opposition to the 2021 coup. India raised the concern about Myanmar political situation

only mentioning development and democratic transition. Additionally, ASEAN adopted the five-point consensus on Myanmar at 2021 ASEAN Leaders Meeting in Indonesia. The recommendation of ASEAN five-point consensus is to tackle Myanmar's crisis as a polite and dialogue way. But the junta ignored the ASEAN five points consensus and conducted widespread human rights violations within the nation. The Singapore Defense Minister warned the Myanmar junta against exploiting ASEAN for political retaliation or manipulative purposes that could compromise ASEAN's position. Evaluating the responses upon Myanmar political crisis, there are contradictions whether Myanmar issues are an internal issue or regional issues. A reason why is that the responses of the respective countries portrayed the theoretical perception of their foreign policy primarily realism and neoliberalism.

Mainstream theories in International Relations

- **Realism**

From the perspective of realism in international relations theory, security and sovereignty comes first in its conceptual practices. Realism is that the international sphere is anarchy, and there is no supreme authority in international relations. Therefore, states pursue power to survive in a chaotic world and prioritize national interest. By doing so, the decision making of states in realism is rational, emphasizing national security and sovereignty principles as critical dimensions in international relations. China, a realist country, maximizes its power and preserving its national security at all costs. In the theoretical explanation of realism, it is argued that human rights are soft issues and irrelevant in its framework. As realist, the fundamental value is security, and it should override the morals of individuals in terms of power consumption in international relations. (Heywood & Whitham, 2023). Realist thought the international law and conventions are weak and they are not subjectively binding. While the United Nations order the world agenda with peace, development and security, China articulates into strong states, social stability and development in contemporary world view.

- **Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism is currently applied theory in most part of the world in which institutions are the key facilitators in international politics. Neoliberalism argues that cooperative action in global politics assures global peace in an anarchic system. Neoliberalism based on the liberal value of freedom and life. According to John Locke, "human rights are life, liberty and property". The term neoliberalism was widely implied in the post-Cold War with the founding of institutions such as the World Trade Organization, and European Union. In the contemporary world, human rights is a subject of international legacy. Institutions are adhered to protect human rights across the world. States, a member of international institutions, are responsible for protecting human rights as international legitimacy as one of the norms of international relations. For instance, the United Nations have adopted the responsibility to protect and address human rights violations issues in the world.

Ideological confrontation and foreign perspective over Myanmar crisis

Theoretically, Myanmar issue is rhetorical in terms of different theories of implication. Realists, such as China and Russia repeatedly defend that Myanmar issue is its own sovereignty issue as Myanmar is in the strategic position of China's Belt and Road Initiative for geo-strategic agenda while the liberal groups claim that its is a humanitarian crisis. Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra commented that “Myanmar conflict was an internal affair” to Thai media (Bangkok Post, 2024). In a visit to Myanmar, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that “Myanmar’s issue is sovereignty and internal issues”. U.S. Alternative Representative for Special Political Affairs at the UN, Robert Wood said that “the situation in Myanmar presents a growing threat to international security, particularly for those in the Indo-Pacific,” (US Special Mission to UN, 2024).

Whether there is an ideological confrontation, geographically the Myanmar crisis shifted from domestic crisis to regional issues regarding the “spillover effect” to its neighboring countries. Forced migration because of humanitarian suppression, weaken domestic governance and transnational crimes in Myanmar are alerts challenges for regionalism. Practically, In terms of disputing over regional issue or internal issues, the cross-border issues occurring in India, Thailand and China borders are practically cultivated the challenges to the regional stability due to transnational crimes.

Impact of Myanmar political crisis to Thailand, China and India

The spillover issues regarding Myanmar civil war posed a potential challenge to regionalism and human security due to the consequences of the political crisis in Myanmar. In terms of regional development in Southeast Asia, there are influencing factors that Myanmar is a potential threat to three main issues; drug trafficking, cyber scams and forced migrations. The transboundary issues of these categories are contemporary challenges to regionalism. Specifically, Myanmar neighbors, Thailand, China and India are critically impacted from those issues.

Thailand

In Thailand, the migrations, and illegal drug trafficking and online scam are involved as transboundary issues along Myanmar-Thailand border. Many young people from Myanmar are fleeing to Thailand for better work opportunities, low living costs and reasons to be geographically close. Furthermore, recent conscription law in Myanmar in 2024 pushed as a factor of forced migration as individuals are not willing to serve in the military. Refugees’ camps in Mae Hong Son, Tak provinces are receiving more IDPs from Myanmar since the conflict started in 2021. Thailand has a burden on displaced individuals from Myanmar; hence, it has impacted on providing humanitarian assistance. Mostly of the migrants in Thailand are

seeking asylums for third world countries, registered migrant workers, individuals from camps and people residing with long term visas (IOM, 2024)/ Therefore there are consequences in terms of employment, social cohesion and cross-border security that Thailand must tackle of.

Thailand is concerned about drug trafficking and cyber scams which might threaten national security. According to Thai narcotics officials, Myanmar civil war fuels a surge for regional illegal drug trading. Deputy secretary-general of Office of the Narcotics Control Board said “the drug trade is one of the factors used to fund weapon purchases”, moreover, the organized crime networks are related with militias and rebel groups’ super labs in Shan and Kachin States in Myanmar. According to ONCB data, drug seizures in three northern Thai provinces have dramatically increased since Myanmar's 2021 coup: crystal meth seizures rose by 284%, amphetamine tablet seizures by 201%, and heroin seizures by 77%. According to a study, 80% of criminal charges in Thai population are related to the use of methamphetamine and the drug trafficking impacted the criminal justice system in the country. Thailand recently emphasized on drugs issues that impose threats to its national security as the web is generally connected with trafficking.

Online scam in Myanmar border is one of the serious issues for Thai government. After the Myanmar civil war, the spread of online scamming is a threat to Asia as it connected to human trafficking, illegal trading and scamming. The scam centers are operated in Myanmar which has been controlled by armed group Border Guard Forces (BGF) (Frontier, 2024). Consequently, many people are trafficked to work at scam and canters in Myanmar and they have been suffering from the threat of life threats. Thailand government takes action against call center scams which are mainly based in Thailand, Malaysia and Myanmar border as those operations has exposed the scale of “high-tech fraud haunting the region” (Thaiger,2024). Myanmar crisis will be interpreted as own sovereignty crisis in Thai; however, the outbreak of Myanmar civil war remains hinder to knock down those organized crimes that is a threat in Southeast Asia region.

China

These scams are related to not only Thailand but also China because the citizens of China are victims of online scams which hesitate China. The increase in scam operations across Myanmar is hellish to Beijing as numerous cyber scams and trafficking victims involve Chinese nationals (Fong & McGowan, 2024). Most of them are operating in Myanmar and included Chinese citizens in the group of scams. These online scams infringe the interests of Chinese citizens. As the result of this, Chinese governments want to eliminate the scams operating in China-Myanmar borders for its national interests. Chinese Diplomats from Foreign Affairs mentioned that China is determined to crack down the online fraud. (Reddick, 2023)

After cracking by Chinese government, the scammers are targeting the victims from Western. Due to the vulnerability to stability and weak rule of law in Myanmar, these operations are still relocating from Myanmar. Moreover, those scams are situated in Shwe Kokko which is controlled by BGF Col. Saw Chit Thu; and, he has certain relations with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. Due the involvement of SAC’s connection in the scam business, SAC favor by

ignoring at first. (Duncan & Rakkanam & Neelakantan & Yusof, 2024). But somehow, it impacted the policy of the Chinese government to Myanmar and the military responded to the actions against gambling in Myanmar. In September 2023, SAC administration arrested over 750 peoples who were involved in the scam; but there are loopholes. Later in October 2023, operation 1027 which impacted the territorial control of the military was started to crack down those scams by the Chinese.

The outbreak of scam (Kyar Phyant) in Myanmar-China border exposes a regional threat because they are connected with crimes, drugs and trafficking as organized crimes. A study from University of Taxes claims that cyber scams operated in Southeast Asia earned over 75 billion US dollars between 2020 and 2024 (Times, 2024). The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights estimates that “more than two hundred thousand people have been trafficked into Myanmar and Cambodia to execute these online scams” (Fong & McGowan, 2024). By looking at these implications, these tragedies due to the military coup are the applicable as a challenge for regional threat.

India

India also have been impacted from the forced migration and drug trafficking due to the Consequences in Myanmar political crisis. Since early March in 2021, armed resistances of revolution forces have been starting in Chin state which is near a border state with India (Irrawaddy, 2021). India Ministry of Home Affairs constructed the measures to handle the flow of migration to Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland from Chin State (CSIS, 2021). In 2021, there were about 1,000 refugees fleeing to India but later increased to 39,800 in 2022 (Mizzima, 2022). India has concerns about its national security upon the areas of diversity among indigenous community, drug trafficking and use of safe heaven follow by the migration. India-Myanmar border has been used as safe havens for India insurgent groups which operated in Myanmar and Myanmar resistance force which based in India.

Historically, Manipur, border state of India, has ethnic conflicts between the Nagas and Kukis. Now the arrival of Kukis from Myanmar to Manipur raises a concern of indigenous tribes' riots for Delhi. This divergent ethnic groups have been connected to the insurgent group along the India borderline. This is a notable challenge to India's national security in dealing with armed ethnic groups on the border line. The movements of People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Eastern Command of the Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) on border lines which have been fought for separation are stridently aggravate to India's national security. The rose of armed resistance in Chin state alarmed the threats to the growth of these insurgent groups. It is accused that PLA and ZRA are supportive with Myanmar military junta forces, however, both PLA and ZRA denied that. (Nikkei Asia, 2024). And these, PLA, ZRA have clashes with Chin National Army which is backed by the National Unity Government. Additionally, there is arm trafficking from Mizoram India to Myanmar. According to Assam Rifles, paramilitary border forces in India, claimed that more than 20 Myanmar nationals have been arrested in the past few months in Mizoram alone for their alleged involvement in smuggling of arms, drugs, gold, betel nuts (Deccan Herald, 2022).

Another significant concern is drug trafficking in Mizoram and Manipur. Narcotics Control Bureau has announced that the drug trafficking in the Northeast is a challenge to India's national security. Illegal drugs produced in the "Golden Triangle are trafficked into India through the northeastern states of Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland, importing from Myanmar" (APN News, 2022). India is trying to prevent instability in Northeast and is planning to construct the border fence which will cost US\$3.7 billion. 1,610-kilometer-long fence will be built along India-Myanmar border line for illegal activities (Bangkok Post, 2024). Regarding this, there are criticisms for the flowing of goods, services and aids for conflict affected people. Security breaches in Northeast India provide transportation of drugs and illegal arms trade. This is obviously worried for India government's national security due to the consequences of what has happening in Chin State.

As international relations theory, China, India and Thailand defined as Myanmar issues are not humanitarian crisis in region, their response to Myanmar issues exposed as the practice of realism. China defends as to protect its BRI interests and India response of constructing fence along border is obviously aligned with the realists. The political turmoil of Myanmar could be addressed as the challenges in neoliberalism terms as they issues are transnational issues. The policy recommendations should be addressed by not only national interests but regionally. India has good relations with Myanmar junta event though the political turmoil of Myanmar has been impacted to its security. How India sees Myanma political crisis seems controversial, but it is more feasible with the appliance of realism as it pursuing its national interest and protecting national security. It seems to manage the implication consequences of humanitarian crisis from neighboring countries by fencing in border line.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the coup, China, India and Thailand did not fully and officially condemn the coup. India wants to maintain the relationship with the junta for its Act East Policy in foreign relations. For India, Myanmar is strategically important in India Act East Policy which is a geopolitical strategy for earning its power in the Indo-Pacific. India looks at its own national interest and identifies it as an internal crisis; in reality, the ethnic conflict in Manipur, drug trafficking and migration are the concerns for India national security. China and Myanmar junta have had good relations since a long time ago, and China interest's is to protect its Belt and Road Initiative Project in Myanmar and avoid humanitarian intervention from Western. The cyber scams involving Chinese nationals are more and more spreading in the region and it draws attention from Beijing to crack down it its border states. Whether it defends Myanmar sovereignty should be respected, China tackles cyber scams operation are beyond as sovereignty. Myanmar and Thailand have historic dynamic relations since dynasties but, now in modern era the top tier levels at military to military have good relations.

Thailand is cautious in responding to the coup in Myanmar and aware of international reputations and ties with Myanmar junta. Thailand focuses on the development and act like hedging as it has both hands-on military junta and humanitarian assistance. Thai interacts with

the Myanmar government diplomatically and hedging with the Myanmar junta, on the other with humanitarian assistance forces. Although Thai defends the “internal crisis”, Thai is the most affected country due to the spillover effect of Myanmar civil war. The emergence of organized crimes along Myanmar-Thai border are highlighted as a result of Myanmar civil war in various issues, notably drug trafficking and scams. The sources and exacerbation of conflicts can be seen as migration due to high volume of human rights violations, weak and complex governance among military junta and militia groups. The lack of acknowledgement of human rights violations committed by the junta, and letting military governments fail to reach good governance created a regional threat in terms of transnational crimes.

Myanmar political crisis is deadlock to address in dialogue platform by leverage of all stakeholders. Meanwhile international community call for an inclusive dialogue for peace and stability in Myanmar. However, crimes against humanity and human rights violations are consequential for the international community and required to react with constructive action against human rights violations. ASEAN and international community like India and China need to acknowledge the crimes against humanity in Myanmar and consecutive conditions in regionalism. Instead of pushing to uphold multilateral platform, military junta should be penalized for the suppression against human rights which is an international norm. If not, the multilateral dialogue platform suggest by ASEAN or China will not be acknowledged by the key stakeholders in Myanmar and will not earn trusteeship upon the dialogue platform.

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