

A “Secular ISIL” Rises In Southeast Asia

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(Please read [Part I](#) before this article)

Clash Of Interests

A triad of Great Power interests intersects in the confined area of the India-Myanmar border, and each actor has differing objectives, motivations, and apprehensions. When one includes Myanmar itself into the foray, a ‘quarrelling quartet’ of contradictory trajectories emerges:

Myanmar:

Internal Balancing

Beginning with the country most adversely affected by domestic and foreign militancy (as well as the subject of the three Great Powers’ intrigues), Naypyidaw is in the midst of a very dangerous internal and external balancing act. On the home front, it’s struggling to manage an [extraordinarily sensitive truce](#) between the myriad rebel groups fighting against it. General elections are planned for [early November](#), and Myanmar’s [new Western partners](#) will be [observantly watching](#) to make sure that it goes according to their subjectively determined expectations, and any internal turmoil prior to the vote could ‘discredit’ it or result in its delay. Both of these scenarios would see the West serve harsh rebukes and thinly veiled economic and political threats to Myanmar, which the country’s authorities are keen to avoid at this moment, thus bringing one to the topic of the international tightrope that it’s currently walking.

External Balancing

Myanmar used to be closely aligned with China during its ‘[pariah period](#)’ from 1989-2011, during which the West sanctioned the military-led government for its supposedly ‘undemocratic’ nature and sought to isolate it in all possible ways. This inevitably drove it closer to China, which never harbors any reservations about its potential partners’ domestic policies, and led to the development of extremely fruitful relations between the two. However, Myanmar may have moved *too close* to China in the sense that it entered into a visibly [unbalanced material relationship](#) with it that began to draw the locals’ ire. Citizens in the far-flung and rebel-influenced (and at times, rebel-held) territories became enraged that their material wealth was being exported in exchange for scarcely any compensation, thus generating a simmering social conflict that threatened to erupt into larger, perhaps militant, manifestations.

Especially offensive to many were Beijing’s plans for the [Mysitone Dam](#), which would have flooded an area the size of Singapore in order to send electricity to China. The ‘transitioning government’, which had embarked on the symbolic road to an on-the-surface civilian

administration in [early 2011](#) (following elections in late-2010), saw the project as a severe vulnerable to stability during a rocky political period, hence it [decided to halt it](#) in September 2011. It was around this time that Myanmar also began making overtures to the US, which ultimately resulted in the West [easing the sanctions regime](#) that was put into place against the country. Obama made an [historic visit](#) in November 2012 that seemed to confirm the mutual acceptance of Myanmar's pro-Western pivot, but it hasn't been without its strategic risks, most notably the threat perception that China has experienced as a result of these sudden shifts along its southern border (to say nothing of the internal vulnerabilities, such as [hyper-nationalist Buddhist thugs](#), that became exposed to increased Western manipulation).

In Limbo

Myanmar is currently in a state of limbo, both internally and externally, and this makes the country particularly unstable. Domestically speaking, the slightest provocation could relight the fuse of civil war, which might quickly spark a larger, all-out conflict. In the midst of its domestic political transition (if even in name only, although it has lifted the citizens' bar of expectation for their government), Naypyidaw wants everything to proceed smoothly, and tumult in the regions could rapidly ricochet destabilization right back into the center, thereby undermining the situation throughout the entire country. On top of that, Myanmar has positioned itself between both the West and China, with a foot in each camp, and it's unknown how long it can continue this uneasy balance. On the one hand, it's sought to lessen its dependency on China, but it still fulfills a critical role for Beijing in providing a non-Malacca route for the latter's [oil and gas pipelines](#). As per the West, [investment](#) and de-facto 'recognition' have flooded into the country since 2011, but Myanmar's new 'partners' [haven't fully removed their sanctions](#) and are still making domestic demands against the country (notably concerning [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) and the [Rohingyas](#)). If something 'goes wrong' in the country's publicized pro-Western pivot, then the sanctions could realistically be reimposed and the US could actively push for the Myanmar's dissolution into a plethora of semi-functioning nation states.

The country's presently precarious position and the colossal consequences at stake make one think that Myanmar may have inadvertently gotten into a situation where it's no longer fully in control of its future, and that a wide range of state and non-state actors hold the real power instead.

India:

Military Imperatives

The most important strategic task for India is to seek a middle ground between securing the Northeast and managing relations with Myanmar, but this is entirely easier said than done. Part I explored the security threats wracking Northeast India at the moment, and the conglomeration of terrorist groups via the UNFLW umbrella and their sanctuary status in Myanmar has infinitely complicated the situation. New Delhi is faced with the intractable conundrum of figuring how out to achieve its strategic task, and it looks as though it's found itself in a classic dilemma. Engaging in cross-border military strikes against Myanmar-based terrorists could theoretically eliminate that present threat (if carried out to its fullest extent), but it would initiate a new one by disturbing the delicate equilibrium between the other rebels and the government there, or motivating reprisal attacks within Northeast India itself. At the same time, doing nothing might only embolden the terrorists into striking again, and

they could also metamorphasize into a deadlier force if left uninterrupted in Myanmar (just as ISIL grew by exploiting its border safe havens in the Mideast).

Diplomatic Dilemma

Another prime consideration for India is how to preserve positive relations with Myanmar amidst all of this political and military dynamism. Even in the far-off event that the UNLWF and Myanmar's rebels could both be neutralized and stability somehow restored to the mutual frontier, all of this would be for naught if Naypyidaw is no longer on good terms with New Delhi. For example, uncoordinated strikes on Myanmar's territory during a protracted anti-militant campaign (whether unilateral or conducted jointly) could create a frightening security dilemma where Naypyidaw loses complete trust in New Delhi's intentions and re-pivots towards Beijing in response. It's not entirely unlikely, either, since if Myanmar's military begins to perceive of India as an aggressive force behaving unilaterally (through go-it-alone strikes) or a destabilizing force that doesn't respect its limits (engaging in overzealous, uncoordinated military activity that disintegrates Myanmar's tenuous truce), then it would promptly pivot to China out of self-preservation, feeling that its sovereignty (and just as importantly, the rule of the military government) is critically endangered.

Without Myanmar's full complicity, the ASEAN highway is doomed, however, there's the slight possibility (however remote) than the myriad of nation-states that could emerge from the country's dissolution might cooperate with New Delhi's designs. But even if that's their stated intent, the security situation might preclude its construction, and plus, the fact that the road would then have to transit a patchwork of states instead of just one makes it untenable and more easily subject to geopolitical blackmail.

China:

Regional Trade And Strategic Security

✘ More than anything, China endeavors to see Northeast India and Myanmar stable so as to facilitate the South Asian Silk Road via the BCIM trade corridor. Although these states also share in the same goal of regional stability, they may not necessarily be as enthusiastic about the BCIM as they've publicly let on. India could just be paying lip service to the idea in order to preserve a diplomatic face of cooperation towards China, while intending to leave Beijing out of the BIM framework. In fact, India is the leader of an alternative, competitive structure called the [Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Trade and Economic Cooperation](#) (BIMSTEC), which it can energize through the ASEAN highway in order to promote its [non-Chinese economic vision](#) in the region. India can't ever entirely remove Chinese economic influence in Bangladesh, Myanmar, or Thailand, but what it can do is create the conditions for heightened competition with it that could potentially result in relative market setbacks vis-à-vis Indian inroads. India also shares [much deeper civilizational bonds with these three states \(and even Malaysia and Indonesia\)](#) than China does, meaning that it could potentially up the ante in its rivalry to asymmetrical, soft power levels in order to gain an advantage over its chief competitor in the region.

China can never replace the civilizational ties between India and ASEAN, but it can arguably best it on the economic front. In order to preempt India from becoming too strong of an economic rival, China needs to see to it that regional trading trends remain to its advantage, and that the disruptive threat posed by the ASEAN highway is neutralized one way or

another. Should that come to be, and India must resultantly rely mostly on its emerging maritime trade network with the region, then China can rest assured that it will remain the most pivotal partner for mainland ASEAN for the indefinite future. As has been demonstrated over the past three decades, China can then transform the trading relationship it has with its partners into an intensified political one, which could tangentially be used to rebuff Indian influence along Beijing's exposed southern flank and guarantee its strategic security. Thus, the most important Chinese objective vis-à-vis India's Southeast Asian shift is to see to it that the ASEAN highway is never built.

Legitimate Buffers

Any discussion about China's strategic security in ASEAN requires a complementary one about its need for legitimate buffers. While these could be asymmetrical in terms of trading arrangements (ergo China's opposition to the TTIP) or political such as hosting 'opposition' leaders (like [Aung San Suu Kyi's big visit to China](#)), this section of the article will only touch upon its geopolitical aspects. In general, China previously viewed Myanmar as constituting the critical component of its mainland ASEAN policy. The country was seen as a friendly neighbor, safe from the reach of Western influence, that could function as a strategic outlet to the open seas. A logical economic corridor could divert material and resource trade away from the potentially American-blockaded Malacca chokehold and therefore ensure a deeper level of Chinese strategic security. However, things didn't pan out exactly as Beijing had anticipated, and due to the combination of Chinese overreach and Western wooing, Myanmar made the decision to decisively pivot away from its dominating neighbor while still retaining some forms of strategic collaboration with it.

Naypyidaw's monumental move came as a shock to China, which in no way saw it coming (be it out of miscalculation or hubris), and Beijing has since then struggled to replace the international buffer that it has lost. Understanding that Myanmar's choice is irreversible for the time being (provided India doesn't commit a major strategic screw-up), China has come to terms with the fact that the Southeast Asian buffer which formerly blocked conventional Indian influence into ASEAN is long gone. Instead, Beijing has had to reconceptualize its idea of buffers from the state to sub-state level, whereby it now views certain areas within India and Myanmar as potentially fulfilling this role. It's not to say that China is directly interfering in the domestic affairs of its two neighbors (as it has been [accused](#) of having [previously done](#)), but that it does have a strategic interest in seeing simmering tension prevent their full rapprochement (which would lead to the construction of the ASEAN highway and all of its negative economic consequences for China). Beijing's ideal buffer thus extends from all of Northeast India down into the rebel provinces of Myanmar, thus forming a contiguous belt of eclectic ethnicities and religions.

Even with its reconceived buffers, however, China is cognizant of the unprecedented chaos that would erupt if this '[Balkanized belt](#)' devolved into full-fledged violence, hence why it has no stake in exacerbating tensions between these entities and their central governments past the point of no return. China doesn't want to see a chain reaction of actual secessionism along its borders that could endanger its own domestic security, as its only wish is to see low-intensity conflict impede the establishment of the ASEAN highway and strategic partnerships between India and its transit states. As such, China only shows implicit favor for legitimate buffers, meaning those which are not terrorist groups or have any real potential in actualizing their secessionist demands, but it must be noted that India's definition of a terrorist group may not be shared by China, meaning that covert or diplomatic engagement with certain secessionist organizations in India's Northeast might

not necessarily be off limits for Beijing. In spite of this, China is expected to be against any organization such as the UNLFW that unites separatist-oriented groups, since this strategic convergence increases the chances of their success, and likewise, the probability of uncontrollable chaos along China's borders (which Beijing in no way wants to see).

US:

✘ Washington has completely schizophrenic interests in this area, since it stands to win if either of the two main scenarios materializes. On the one hand, it intensely wants to see India 'Act East' along the ASEAN highway and fortify its BIMSTECs project against China, but on the other, it receives a Brzezinski-esque benefit from any potential ethno-political meltdown in Northeast India and Myanmar. To elaborate, it could [weaponize the dissolution process](#) in either of these two areas in order to threaten China and/or punish India (or keep it in unipolar check). Right now, it's understood that the US is standing on the sidelines and monitoring the situation, intending to covertly intervene as necessary to tilt the course of events along its desired scenario, if need be.

Because it has no solid interests and can fluidly adapt to either circumstance with near-equal strategic benefit, the US is the most dangerous actor in this situation and the one whose reaction must be monitored most closely. In a sense, it holds the controlling influence over how events play out. It could support or discriminate between India and Myanmar's respective (or even joint) efforts to combat terrorism and separatism, or it could actively encourage separatism in one or both of them. Another possibility is that the US stands idle and lets events develop 'naturally' for as long as possible. Either way, the US is the only one of the four actors that has the capability of redirecting events in near-limitless ways while remaining as insulated from their consequences as possible, thereby making it the most important (if geographically indirect) player in this unfolding conflict.

The Play Book

The UNLFW is the 'perfect spark' for setting off a larger conflagration, and with India have already attacked its positions in Myanmar (in what [may](#) or [may not](#) have been an unauthorized strike), it's worthwhile to forecast the course of events that have been set into motion and analyze their influencing factors. Here's what needs to be considered:

Variables:

Unilateral Or Complicit Strike?

Did India attack inside Myanmar without informing Naypyidaw in advance (or at all) or did it do so with the full complicity of its authorities, no matter how plausibly they try to deny it? This is the key initial condition that dramatically sets the stage for everything else that follows.

Independent Or Joint Follow-Up Strike?

Will India follow through with its strike or was the earlier operation a 'one-off' instance? If it continues pursuing its military objectives, will it do so independently or in conjunction with Myanmar, and how far will it go? And in if India carries out operations on its own, will Myanmar be complicit in them or unaware?

Terrorist/Rebel Response?

How do the Indian terrorists and Myanmar rebels react to the first strike, and perhaps, any more that follow? Will UNLFW activate its Indian-based terrorist network to order more attacks, and could the Myanmar rebels fight back against any Indian and/or Myanmar government incursions in their territory? What impact would it have on the ceasefire?

3 Stages, 3 Scenarios:

Events along the Indian-Myanmar border are expected to follow a step-by-step progression in building up to the next scenario, although of course, any of the three steps/scenarios could potentially occur out of order:

Tremors

India's strike was an inevitable reaction to bubbling terrorist violence in the Northeast, but due to the latest attack having been the worst such ambush in 20 years, its security establishment felt compelled to do something significantly symbolic. The terrorists and/or Myanmar rebels aren't baited into an emotional reaction, but instead bide their time and thoroughly plot their response. Tremors are felt, but no one knows when or where the next rumbling will occur (and whether it'll be initiated by India or the terrorists). A nervous trepidation takes hold of all actors, although the Indian security establishment might have haughtily convinced itself that no prompt response by its adversaries indicates that it has won, in which case its guard will be lowered and the next terrorist attack will once more catch it unaware.

Rumblings

Some type of follow-up strike is commenced, be it by India and/or Myanmar or by the UNLFW and/or the rebels. The regional balance is threatened and a critical situation quickly develops. Global attention and apprehension is shifted to this relatively unknown corner of the world, with many voices raising fear that the violence can spread if it's not immediately contained. A full-on earthquake has yet to occur, but the earlier trembling has now developed into a loud rumble, and everyone is waiting for what they believe to be an inevitable escalation. All active participants (e.g. India and UNLFW) brace themselves for conflict, while their immediate 'dependencies' (e.g. Myanmar and the rebels), if they haven't already traded a follow-up blow with one another (as the other two opposing sides have done to get to this step/scenario), then they're certainly preparing to in the event that they get sucked into a wider, forthcoming war.

Earthquake

India and/or Myanmar go on a substantial offensive against the UNLFW and/or rebels (or vice-versa), which opens up a Pandora's Box of pandemonium. At this point, definitive forecasting is difficult to engage in, although for all intents and purposes, it can be assumed that Myanmar's unity (already a geopolitical oxymoron of sorts) will be shattered, and that the consequent renewal of large-scale civil warfare in the country would create urgent security challenges for each of its neighbors. India may enter into an unsustainable military operation (much as the [Saudis have done in Yemen](#)) in which the only choices are between a bad conclusion and the worst conclusion (per its strategic perspectives). If India finds its mainland path to ASEAN stonewalled, then it'll likely invest more in maritime capabilities in buffeting the '[Cotton Route](#)', which could then enhance its medium-term capability in projecting sizeable influence in the South China Sea (alongside the US, Japan, and Australia).

As such, the inadvertent facilitation of this formidable containment threat to China would herald in its own geopolitical earthquake, the aftershocks of which would be immensely destabilizing.

Concluding Thoughts

The Northeast Indian and Myanmar destabilizations have long become interlinked and transnationalized, but it was the creation of the UNLFW, 'the secular ISIL', and India's cross-border attack against them that really brought the unstable nature of this region to the global spotlight. India was compelled to respond to the UNFLW in some form or another after falling victim to the largest ambush in two decades. . India needs the region to be stabilized in order to 'Act East' and counter China in ASEAN, but the irony is that it may have unwittingly set into motion uncontrollable chaotic forces in Myanmar that could result in the broader area's intensified destabilization.

It's not expected that the conflict potential between all actors will dissipate anytime in the near future - on the contrary, things seem to be just heating up. China has important security interests that are endangered by any violent escalations, but it's realistically powerless to affect the flow of events and seems primed in being relegated to (proactively) responding to them as they develop. The US, on the other hand, is in the most powerful position vis-à-vis all the other actors, in that it profit from whichever course the conflict takes, be it an Indian-Myanmar success in squashing the terrorists/rebels (and the catapulting of India's long-term, anti-China influence in ASEAN), or an all-out 'Eurasian Balkans' scenario that can [chaotically suck in each of its neighbors](#). It's unclear at the moment which of the two end-game scenarios is most likely, but it's evident that New Delhi's decision to intervene in Myanmar was a monumental one that marks a milestone in the region's conflict dynamics, no matter how the situation ultimately turns out.

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