



## The Evolving Geo-Politics of India-Myanmar Relations: A Strategic Analysis

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### Abstract

India and Myanmar share deep historical, cultural, and ethnic ties, forming a crucial relationship rooted in their shared past. However, this relationship is complex and dynamic, evolving from a period of close cooperation in the post-independence era to a more pragmatic, realpolitik approach driven by contemporary strategic and economic interests. This article analyses the multifaceted dimensions of the India-Myanmar relationship, examining the key drivers and challenges that shape their bilateral engagement. It explores the geo-political significance of Myanmar as a land bridge to Southeast Asia, a cornerstone of India's Act East Policy. The analysis also delves into the critical issues of border security, including counter-insurgency operations and the implications of the Free Movement Regime (FMR), and economic cooperation, with a focus on connectivity projects like the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. Furthermore, the paper discusses the impact of internal political developments in Myanmar, such as the 2021 military coup, and the growing influence of China on India's strategic calculations.

**Keywords:** India, myanmar, act east policy, border security, connectivity, geo-politics, china

### Introduction

The India-Myanmar relationship is a complex and multifaceted one, rooted in a shared history and geography but heavily influenced by contemporary geo-political and economic realities. The two countries, sharing a 1,643 kilometer land border and a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal, have seen their bilateral ties evolve from a period of historical friendship to a more pragmatic, strategic partnership. This comprehensive analysis will explore the various dimensions of this relationship, including its historical context, India's strategic imperatives, key connectivity projects, security challenges, economic cooperation, and the significant role of the China.

### India Myanmar relation in term of Historical and Cultural Ties

India and Myanmar have a relationship built on deep historical and cultural ties that have existed for centuries. These ties are a foundational element of their bilateral relationship, influencing everything from religion to colonial history and the movement of people.

### Cultural and Religious Connections

The most significant cultural bond between India and Myanmar is Buddhism. It's believed that Buddhism was introduced to Myanmar from India, and today, the vast majority of the Myanmar population practices Theravada Buddhism. For many in Myanmar, India is the land of Lord Buddha, a revered place of pilgrimage, with sacred sites like Bodh Gaya drawing countless visitors. This shared religious heritage has fostered a strong spiritual connection and a sense of a common past. Beyond religion, historical interactions have also shaped their cultural landscape. Indian languages like Pali and Sanskrit influenced the Burmese script, and Indian literature and philosophies spread to Myanmar.

### Historical Trajectory

The historical relationship can be divided into several key periods:

- **Ancient and Pre-Colonial Era:** Before modern borders were established, there was a free flow of trade, ideas, and people between the two regions. Indian traders and missionaries played a crucial role in introducing their culture and religion to what is now Myanmar.
- **Colonial Period:** From 1824 until 1937, Myanmar was a province of British India. This period had a profound impact, as it integrated Myanmar into the British administrative system based in Delhi. Large numbers of Indians migrated to Myanmar for work in the civil service and economy, leading to both a blending of cultures and, at times, social tension.
- **Post-Independence:** After gaining independence within months of each other in 1947 and 1948, the two countries initially enjoyed strong relations. The shared experience of the anti-colonial struggle led to a close friendship between their first prime ministers, Jawaharlal Nehru and U Nu. This era was characterized by mutual support and shared interests, including an early alignment on the Non-Aligned Movement.
- **Challenges and Shifts:** The relationship faced strain in the 1960s with the military coup in Myanmar and the subsequent expulsion of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Indians. This led to a period of political estrangement, as India, a democracy, was wary of the military junta's rule.

Despite these periods of tension, the historical and cultural ties have remained an enduring link between the two

nations, providing a basis for renewed engagement in later decades, particularly with India's Look East and Act East policies.

### **India Myanmar Relation in term of the Strategic Shift: From Look East to Act East**

India's relationship with Myanmar has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from the Look East Policy to the more proactive and comprehensive Act East Policy. This shift, initiated in 2014, represents a change in approach and a broader strategic vision for India's engagement with its eastern neighbors, with Myanmar playing a pivotal role.

#### **The Look East Policy (1990s-2014)**

Launched in the early 1990s, the Look East Policy was primarily an economic initiative designed to improve India's economic relations with Southeast Asian nations. For decades, India's foreign policy had been heavily influenced by a non-aligned stance and close ties with the Soviet Union. However, with the end of the Cold War and India's economic liberalization, the country sought new markets and strategic partnerships to fuel its growth.

Myanmar, sharing a long land and maritime border with India's northeastern states, was seen as a crucial gateway. The initial focus of this policy towards Myanmar was pragmatic:

- **Economic Engagement:** The policy sought to open up markets in Southeast Asia through Myanmar, primarily focusing on trade and investment. India signed trade agreements and increased its investments in Myanmar's energy and infrastructure sectors.
- **Security Concerns:** India also started engaging with Myanmar's military junta to address the issue of insurgent groups operating in India's northeastern states and seeking refuge across the border. This marked a shift from India's earlier support for Myanmar's pro-democracy movement to a more realistic and security-focused approach.
- **Connectivity Projects:** Key infrastructure projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project were conceived during this period to link India's landlocked northeast to the Bay of Bengal and beyond.

The Look East Policy, however, was often criticized for its slow implementation and for being largely reactive. It lacked the necessary political and strategic depth to fully realize India's potential in the region.

#### **The Act East Policy (2014 onwards)**

The Act East Policy, introduced by the Narendra Modi government in 2014, was a strategic upgrade of its predecessor. It went beyond the purely economic focus of Look East to embrace a more proactive and multidimensional engagement. The Act East policy is centered on four Cs: Commerce, Connectivity, Culture, and

Capacity Building. This policy significantly elevated Myanmar's importance in India's foreign policy.

The strategic shift to Act East fundamentally changed the dynamics of India's relationship with Myanmar in several key ways:

#### **India Myanmar relation in term of enhanced Connectivity**

While the connectivity projects were initiated under the Look East policy, the Act East policy injected renewed energy and a greater sense of urgency. The goal was to not just connect India to Myanmar but to use Myanmar as a land and sea bridge to the entire ASEAN region. The Kaladan project, for instance, aims to provide an alternate route for shipping goods to India's northeastern states, bypassing the narrow and congested Siliguri Corridor. The Trilateral Highway, meanwhile, is designed to link India's Moreh to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar, improving regional trade and people-to-people contact.

#### **India Myanmar relation in term of Geopolitical and Strategic Imperatives**

India's relationship with Myanmar is of significant geopolitical importance due to its strategic location, which serves as a land bridge to Southeast Asia. This relationship is crucial for India to achieve several foreign policy objectives, including its Act East Policy and Neighbourhood First policy.

#### **Its key geopolitical importance are as following**

- **Gateway to Southeast Asia:** Myanmar is the only country in Southeast Asia that shares a land border with India. This makes it a crucial land gateway for India to enhance its connectivity, trade, and strategic ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This is a foundational element of India's Act East Policy, which aims to promote economic and strategic cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific region.
- **Connectivity Projects:** To leverage this geographical advantage, India has invested in several infrastructure projects in Myanmar. **Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project:** This ambitious project links the eastern Indian port of Kolkata with the Sittwe port in Myanmar, and then connects to India's northeastern state of Mizoram via a river and road route. The project provides an alternative route for transporting goods to India's landlocked northeastern states, bypassing the narrow Siliguri Corridor, also known as the Chicken's Neck. **India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway:** This highway project aims to connect Moreh in Manipur, India, with Mae Sot in Thailand, passing through Myanmar. The highway is expected to boost trade, tourism, and people-to-people contact among the three nations.
- **Countering China's Influence:** China's growing presence in Myanmar, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and investments in infrastructure

like the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port, is a major concern for India. A stable and friendly relationship with Myanmar allows India to counterbalance China's influence in the region and secure its own strategic interests in the Bay of Bengal.

- **Internal Security:** The long and porous 1,643 km border between India and Myanmar is a security concern for India. Insurgent groups operating in India's northeastern states have historically used Myanmar's territory as a base. Security cooperation with the Myanmar government is therefore vital for India to conduct joint operations, share intelligence, and curb cross-border insurgency, arms trafficking, and drug smuggling.
- **Energy Security:** Myanmar is rich in natural resources, including oil and natural gas. India has invested in Myanmar's energy sector, as seen with companies like ONGC Videsh, to diversify its energy sources and enhance its energy security.
- **Maritime Security:** Both countries share a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal. A strong relationship with Myanmar is important for India to ensure the security of sea lanes, combat piracy, and foster naval cooperation to maintain a stable maritime environment in the region.

### India Myanmar relation in term of Soft Power Approach

India's relationship with Myanmar, in terms of a soft power approach, is deeply rooted in shared historical, cultural, and religious connections. Soft power, the ability to attract and persuade through culture, political ideals, and policies, has been a key component of India's Act East Policy and its broader regional strategy. India leverages these ties to build goodwill, counter the influence of other regional players (particularly China), and enhance its strategic position in Southeast Asia.

### Cultural and Religious Diplomacy

The most significant aspect of India's soft power in Myanmar is its Buddhist heritage. Myanmar is a predominantly Buddhist nation, and India, as the birthplace of Buddhism, holds a special spiritual significance. India has actively pursued Buddhist diplomacy through several initiatives:

- **Restoration of Religious Sites:** India has undertaken the restoration of historical Buddhist sites in Myanmar, most notably the Ananda Temple in Bagan.
- **Donations and Exchanges:** India has donated a replica of the Sarnath Buddha statue to the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, a major symbol of the shared religious bond.
- **Pilgrimage and Tourism:** India promotes Buddhist pilgrimage circuits, encouraging people from Myanmar to visit sacred sites in India. This not only boosts

tourism but also strengthens people-to-people connections.

### Educational and Human Resource Development

India has invested in education and capacity-building to foster long-term ties and goodwill. This includes:

- **Scholarships and Training Programs:** Myanmar is a major beneficiary of Indian government scholarships and training programs, such as the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC). These programs offer training in various fields, from IT to agriculture.
- **Establishing Institutions:** India has provided assistance in setting up institutions in Myanmar, such as the Myanmar Institute of Information Technology and the Advanced Centre for Agricultural Research and Education, to help develop Myanmar's human resources.

### Humanitarian Assistance and Development Aid

India's soft power is also demonstrated through its humanitarian and developmental aid. This assistance is often non-prescriptive, allowing Myanmar to identify its own needs.

- **Disaster Relief:** India has consistently provided humanitarian assistance to Myanmar during natural disasters, such as its swift response with relief materials following Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and an earthquake in 2025.
- **Developmental Projects:** India has extended lines of credit and developmental assistance for projects that directly benefit local communities, including the construction of schools and health infrastructure in border areas.

India's soft power approach in Myanmar is a strategic effort to build a relationship based on mutual respect and shared values. By leveraging its cultural, religious, and developmental strengths, India aims to create a positive and lasting influence in its eastern neighbour, which is crucial for its strategic interests in the region.

### Challenges and Future Trajectory to India-Myanmar Relations

India and Myanmar's relationship, while historically and culturally close, is currently facing significant challenges, with its future trajectory being shaped by internal and external pressures. The 2021 military coup in Myanmar has been a major destabilizing factor, forcing India to balance its strategic interests with its commitment to democratic values. The complex situation has created a multifaceted set of challenges and opportunities for the future.

### Challenges to India-Myanmar Relations

The major challenges impacting the relationship include:

- **Political Instability and the Military Coup:** The military junta's overthrow of the democratically elected government in 2021 has put India in a difficult position. New Delhi has to navigate a delicate balance between

engaging with the junta to ensure border security and protect its investments, while also showing support for democratic principles. This policy paradox has drawn criticism and created uncertainty.

- **Border Security and Refugee Influx:** The 1,643 km porous border between the two countries has become a hotbed for illegal activities. The ongoing civil war in Myanmar has led to a significant influx of refugees, primarily into India's northeastern states like Mizoram and Manipur. This has raised security concerns, exacerbated ethnic tensions, and put a strain on local resources. The Free Movement Regime (FMR), which allows people living along the border to travel up to 16 km into the other country, is being exploited by insurgent groups and criminals for drug trafficking, weapons smuggling, and the movement of counterfeit currency. India's recent decision to fence the border and terminate the FMR is a direct response to these issues.
- **Connectivity Project Delays:** Key infrastructure projects, vital for India's Act East policy, are facing prolonged delays, leading to a trust deficit. The Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project, which aims to connect India's eastern port of Kolkata to Sittwe port in Myanmar, and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, have both been stalled due to security concerns and logistical challenges. The Arakan Army's control over key areas along the Kaladan project route, for instance, has jeopardized its completion.
- **China's Growing Influence:** China's significant economic and strategic influence in Myanmar is a major concern for India. China is Myanmar's largest investor and trading partner, and its involvement in infrastructure projects like the Kyaukpyu port has the potential to encircle India. New Delhi is actively trying to counter this by developing its own projects and maintaining a strong relationship with Myanmar's military, but it faces an uphill battle.
- **The Rohingya Crisis:** The persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority has created a humanitarian crisis that has strained relations. While many Western nations have imposed sanctions, India has maintained a cautious approach, focusing on security concerns and the burden of refugees in India, and refraining from directly criticizing the Myanmar government. India has, however, provided humanitarian aid.

### Future Trajectory of India-Myanmar Relations

The future of the relationship will depend on how India navigates these challenges and leverages its strategic position.

- **Pragmatic Engagement with Stakeholders:** The failure of the junta to consolidate power suggests that a new approach is necessary. India may need to shift its strategy from exclusively engaging with the military to also establishing ties with various ethnic armed groups

and the National Unity Government (NUG). This would ensure that India's interests are protected regardless of the final outcome of the civil war.

- **Reassessing Border Management:** India's decision to fence the border and terminate the FMR will likely be a major point of contention. The future will require a balanced approach that addresses security concerns while also considering the historical and cultural ties of the communities living on both sides of the border. Upgrading infrastructure and formalizing trade at designated checkpoints could be a way forward.
- **Expediting Connectivity Projects:** To restore credibility and compete with China, India must prioritize and expedite the completion of its stalled connectivity projects. These projects are crucial not only for trade but also for linking India's northeastern states with Southeast Asia, thereby bolstering India's economic and strategic presence in the region.
- **Expanding Economic and Development Cooperation:** India can strengthen its relationship by focusing on development assistance and economic cooperation. Providing aid in health and education, as well as promoting two-way trade in sectors like pharmaceuticals and agriculture, will help build goodwill and a stronger foundation for the bilateral relationship. India is currently working to establish a rupee trade settlement mechanism to facilitate commerce.

### Conclusion

After analysing the India- Myanmar relationship, it can be said that the India-Myanmar relationship is a delicate balancing act. While historical and cultural ties provide a foundation, the relationship is ultimately driven by India's strategic imperatives geopolitical competition with China, security of its northeastern states, and the need for regional connectivity. The ongoing political instability in Myanmar, however, poses a significant threat to these objectives. To navigate this complex landscape, India must pursue a nuanced, multi-pronged approach. This includes continuing to push for the completion of key connectivity projects, strengthening security cooperation along the border, providing humanitarian assistance to those affected by the conflict, and engaging with a wide range of stakeholders in Myanmar. India's success in achieving its Act East ambitions and ensuring a stable and secure neighbourhood will depend heavily on its ability to effectively manage this intricate and evolving relationship.

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