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India-Myanmar-China
Conundrum: A Marriage
of Convenience

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...hemmed in like a tender gourd amongst the cacti.

—U Nu, Myanmar's first Prime Minister
on Myanmar's location in the region

Abstract

In order to emerge as a new world power, China is establishing its control in the Indian Ocean Region and Myanmar owing to its geo-strategic location. India and Myanmar share open land and sea borders as a result of which any disturbance in this relation will have clear-cut impact on other countries. The long-standing Western sanctions on Myanmar has swayed it towards China which has greatly exploited it by investing humongous amount of money. To counter Chinese influence on the 'Gateway to the East', India too has invested in Myanmar in sync with its 'Act East Policy', however it still needs to do much more to counter the Chinese influence.

Keywords: Geostrategic Compulsion, Regional Hegemony, CMEC, Malacca Vulnerability, KMMTTP, Economic and Security Interests

Introduction

Never before has Myanmar attracted as much attention as it does now—not since the Second World War. India is connected by land through Myanmar with growing economies of the East and Southeast Asia owing to its location. Myanmar holds a crucial geostrategic position and is frequently seen as a buffer state between China and India. Their relationship is complex, involving both cooperation and competition in their interactions, particularly within the Asian area. The unique location of Myanmar has shaped the socio-cultural character of the nation. Thailand, China, India, Bangladesh, and Laos share land boundaries whereas the long coastline from Bangladesh in the west to Thailand in the east, makes the maritime dimension far more prominent (Bhattacharya, 2007).

Slowly and steadily, Myanmar is turning into a prime illustration of China and India's "race for regional hegemony"—the concerns of both countries' economies and strategic security are driving this race. If one is to take things at their value, China seems to be becoming

Myanmar's closest strategic ally. Is the China-Myanmar connection actually true? Could it be only a "convenience marriage"? The unique and dynamic nature of the relationship matrix between China and Myanmar has significant strategic implications for India. Given the current state of world affairs, India appears to be in dire need of re-evaluating its strategic and political ties with Myanmar.

Mercurial Indo-Myanmar Narrative

India and Myanmar have shared an ancient, entrenched and customary relationship. Ancient Indian Granths were the basis of Burmese script and Buddhism connecting both cultures. Specifically, for millennia, 'Theravada Buddhism' has had a profound impact on Burmese society and culture and still shapes the Burmese psyche today. In the early modern era, both nations were colonies of the British Empire, and from 1886 until 1937, Myanmar was annexed as a part of British India. After being overthrown by the British, the final Mughal emperor of India, Bahadur Shah Zafar, lived and died in exile in Rangoon. Post overthrowing of the Burmese royal family, 'British' desire to control Burma's resources took precedence above all other considerations, and they relocated the family to Ratnagiri in Maharashtra. The region is home to diverse range of linguistic, ethnic, religious and tribal groups. On the Indian side, there are Mizos, Kukis, Meiteis, Nagas, Bodos and Assamese; on the Myanmar side, there are Chins, Nagas and Kachins (Paliwal, 2020). Moreover, the Free Movement regime (FMR) established along the India-Myanmar border since 2018 (as part of India's Act East Policy), allows movement of natives, without much restrictions, residing within 16 km of the porous boundary; however the FMR has not made much of an impact on the inhabitants. Although, cross-border weddings and celebration participation are frequent occurrences.

Independent India's Shifting Foreign Policy

The relationship between India and Myanmar, from the official start of diplomatic relations in 1948 to 1992, can be seen as a sine curve graph i.e. moving from a state of friendship, collaboration, and friendliness to one of tension, coldness, and almost frozen periods. The transition of Indian policy towards Myanmar from "Idealism" to "realism" and political changeover in Myanmar, resulted in substantial impact on bilateral relations.

Myanmar experienced turbulent periods following its independence in 1948, with a flurry of political defeats, economic collapse, and ethnic strife. The "idealist" foreign policy of Prime Minister Shri Jawaharlal Nehru (of India) assisted Prime Minister U Nu of Myanmar in reestablishing peace and stability. A Treaty of Friendship was signed by both countries on 07

July 1951 at Yangon— an important historical milestone, stipulating “Peace and friendship between the two countries...” (Hiep, 2021). During this time, India's political, economic, military support and aid made a significant contribution to the social, political, and economic stability of Myanmar. Strong political and diplomatic ties between the two nations produced advantageous circumstances for the Indian diaspora in Myanmar and led to reciprocal support at the UN and other international fora.

Myanmar's democratic administration was overthrown by a military coup led by General Ne Win in March 1962, thus altering the trajectory of India-Myanmar relations. To demonstrate its disdain for India, the Junta Government left the Non-Aligned Movement and sided with the US, the USSR, and China. Although, formal high-level interactions between the two nations persisted throughout this time, they solely took the shape of international diplomacy. In recent times, by way of a more pragmatic and diplomatic approach, China, has occupied India's position in Myanmar.

The “8888” or “spilled water droplet” event on 08 August 1988, led to protests by masses against ant democracy and corrupt government culminating into the launching of the National League for Democracy (NLD) on 27 August 1988 by Mrs Aung San Suu Kyi (Hiep, 2021). After endorsing democratic movement, India permitted the building of camps for refugees in Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam by the end of 1988. The All-India Radio campaign, which was started by India in 1989–1990, supported Myanmar's democracy movement and helped the NLD win the 1990 parliamentary elections— a victory that the military government refused to recognise. Economic penalties were placed on Myanmar by all major nations and international forums in an effort to pressure the military regime to recognise the parliamentary elections. During this time, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) was only financially supported by China, which also permitted it to engage in commercial and economic endeavours, drawing the Tatmadaw closer to its borders. In terms of national and strategic objectives, India saw the closer ties between China and Myanmar to be an ‘expensive experience’— India was compelled by this to reconsider its foreign policy towards Myanmar, a neighbour. Following 1991, India progressively shifted its foreign policy to one of ‘realism’, viewing the advancement of national interests as the cornerstone of international interactions. Prime Minister Shri PV Narasimha Rao introduced India's Look East Policy (LEP) in 1992, and regarded it as a significant change in the country's foreign policy. Three main elements drove the shift towards foreign policy:-

Firstly, India is concerned not only about China's growing power and influence in Myanmar but also about the possibility of having three Chinese aligned countries i.e Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar as immediate neighbours

Secondly, India is worried about the non-traditional security risks that are rising, such as insurgency movements in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and other Northeastern Indian states.

Thirdly, Myanmar, the lone ASEAN member, was viewed as the entry point to Southeast Asia, and India saw ASEAN and Southeast Asia as essential for its LEP.

Strategic Importance of Myanmar for India

India-Myanmar bilateral relation formally started with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship in 1951. Prime Minister of India, Shri Rajiv Gandhi's, visit to Myanmar in 1987 further laid the groundwork for a deeper partnership. In addition to having strong historical, ethnic, religious and cultural ties, both countries share a 1643 km long land border and 593 nautical miles of marine border. In 1943, at the time of the Japanese occupation of Myanmar, KM Panikkar, observed that the defence of Burma (Myanmar) is in fact the defence of India and it is India's primary concern, no less than Burma's, to see that its frontiers remain inviolate (Bhatia, 2022).

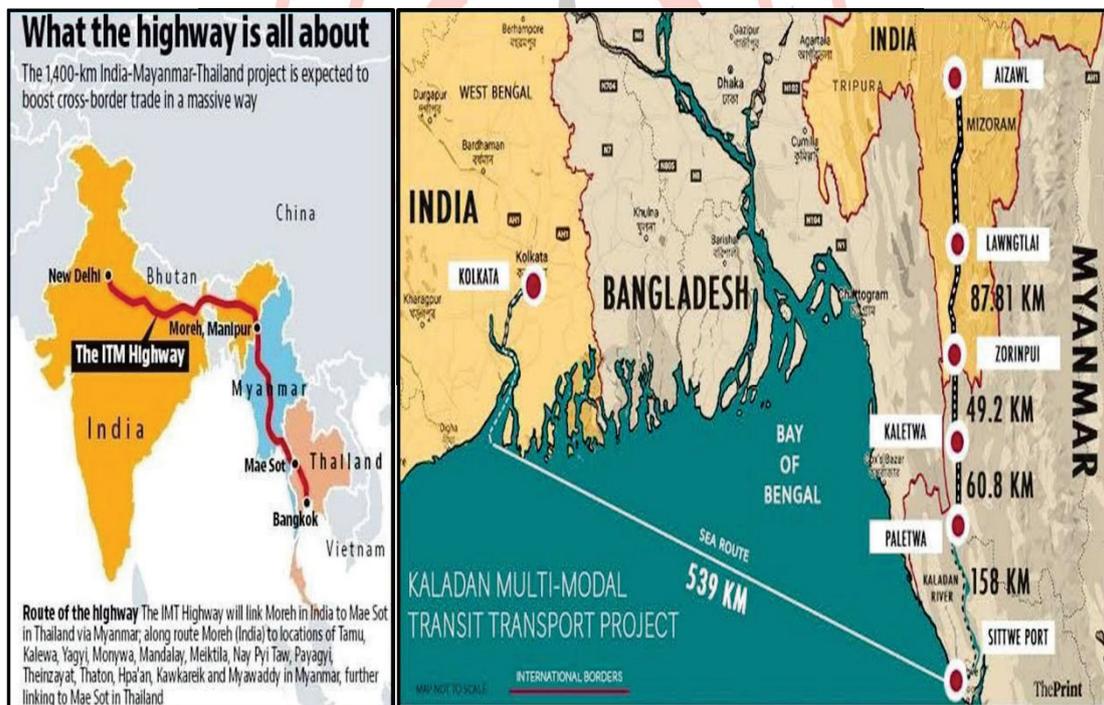
Myanmar's location at the geographic heart of Southeast Asia and India, makes it strategically important for India. The 1643 km land border between Myanmar and northeastern India is the only one in Southeast Asia. Additionally, a 725 km sea border in the Bay of Bengal separates the two nations. The only nation that lies where India's Act East Policy (AEP) and Neighbourhood First Policy converge is Myanmar. Hence, Myanmar is a vital component of India's Indo-Pacific regional diplomacy strategy, acting as a land bridge that links Southeast and South Asia.

India must endeavour to create policies that will enhance and fortify its ties with its neighbours if it is to emerge as a powerful regional force in Asia. China, however, is a major obstacle in the way of this since it wants to lessen India's dominance in the region. As a result, China and India are battling it out for influence in Myanmar. For instance, India developed the Sittwe Port in the Rakhine state of Myanmar as part of its Security and Growth for all in the Region (SAGAR) policy. This port is the Indian counter to Kyaukpyu Port, developed by China to geo-strategically influence the Rakhine state. Besides, the Left-Wing Extremist movement and drug trafficking routes, originating from the Golden Triangle, have an impact on the northeastern regions of India. The militaries of India and Myanmar have conducted numerous cooperative military actions, such as Operation Sunshine, in response to these concerns.

Other Indian businesses that have made investments in Myanmar's energy sector includes Essar, GAIL, and ONGC Videsh Ltd. India is determined to grow its military exports to Myanmar as it would give a boost to "Made in India" armaments sector.

Major Indian Initiatives in Myanmar. On 13 February 2001, the 250 Km long Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemryo highway constructed by India's Border Roads Organisation was officially opened. Its primary purpose was to serve as a key commercial and strategic transport corridor connecting Southeast Asia with North-East India and South Asia overall. A four lane highway of 3,200 Km starting from Guwahati, India linking Mandalay and Yangon, Myanmar and further extending to Mae Sot and Bangkok, Thailand has agreed upon by India and Myanmar. The Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) is in progress to connect Kolkata Port to Sittwe Port in Rakhine State of Myanmar. From Sittwe, the Kaladan river boat route will lead to Lashio, Myanmar, and from there, road transportation will take it to Mizoram, India. Further, Prime Minister Modi declared in 2017, while on a visit to Naypyidaw, that all citizens of Myanmar will be eligible for free or discounted visas to enter India (PTI, 2017).

Map 1: Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project



Source: <https://www.clearias.com/kaladan-multi-modal-transit-project/>

In addition to Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, India and Myanmar are prominent members of BIMSTEC and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, which aids in the development of India's influence and relationships with Southeast Asian countries. In addition

to agreeing to collaborate military, India and Myanmar gave each other a loan of roughly \$500 million in 2013 for the country's development (PTI, 2012). India gave the Myanmar Navy its first submarine in 2020. It was an attack submarine of the kilo class (INS Sindhuvir; currently known as UMS Minye Theinkhathu), renovated and upgraded by Hindustan Shipyard Limited (Laskar,2020).

- **Economic Cooperation.** With a bilateral trade of 1.3 billion USD, India is the fourth largest trading partner of Myanmar behind Thailand, China and Singapore (MEA). Total merchandise trade between India and Myanmar has reached \$1.76 billion in 2022-23 on the back of rising imports from Myanmar (ET, 2023). The Indian government has worked to extend air, land and sea routes to strengthen trade links with Myanmar and establish a gas pipeline. The bilateral Border Trade Agreement of 1994 provides for border trade to be carried out from three designated border points—one each in Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland.
- **Security Cooperation.** In order to dismantle several rebel camps, India and Myanmar armies jointly conducted 'Operation Sunrise' and 'Operation Sunrise 2' in their respective regions in 2019. Post discovery of ties of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and Aqa Mul Mujahideen (AMM) with terrorist organisations like Laskhar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and that Rohingya terrorists were fighting alongside Pakistani terrorists in Kashmir, India backed Myanmar in its efforts to counter these groups.

As part of its Neighbourhood first Responder' strategy, India responded swiftly and efficiently to natural disasters such as the earthquake in Shan State in 2010, cyclones Komen and Mora in 2015 and 2017 respectively. India has contributed to the enhancement and fortification of Myanmar's National Disaster Response Mechanism. As part of its "Vaccine Maitri" program, India had also sent 1.7 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to Myanmar in January and February of 2021.

China-Myanmar Symbiosis

Post independence from Britain in 1948, Burma has been constantly reeling under domestic instability. Prior to 1990, China and Myanmar both followed different ideologies of communism and democracy respectively. Further, the '8888 event' created a mutually beneficial partnership as China was simultaneously considering Myanmar's strategic and economic interests while Myanmar was in dire need of military equipment and a close friend

to defend its interests. In contrast to global perceptions, Beijing and Yangon implemented a "development first, democracy later" strategy between 1989 and 2011, which established China as the Myanmar junta's unquestionable 'all-weather ally'. China gave significant loans and investments in Myanmar during this 'window of opportunity' while the rest of the world, including India, remained distant and uninterested. One may argue that China's 2007 acquisition of the 1,400 km desired oil and gas pipeline—that ran from the Bay of Bengal to the impoverished Yunnan province—marked a turning point in their bilateral relations.

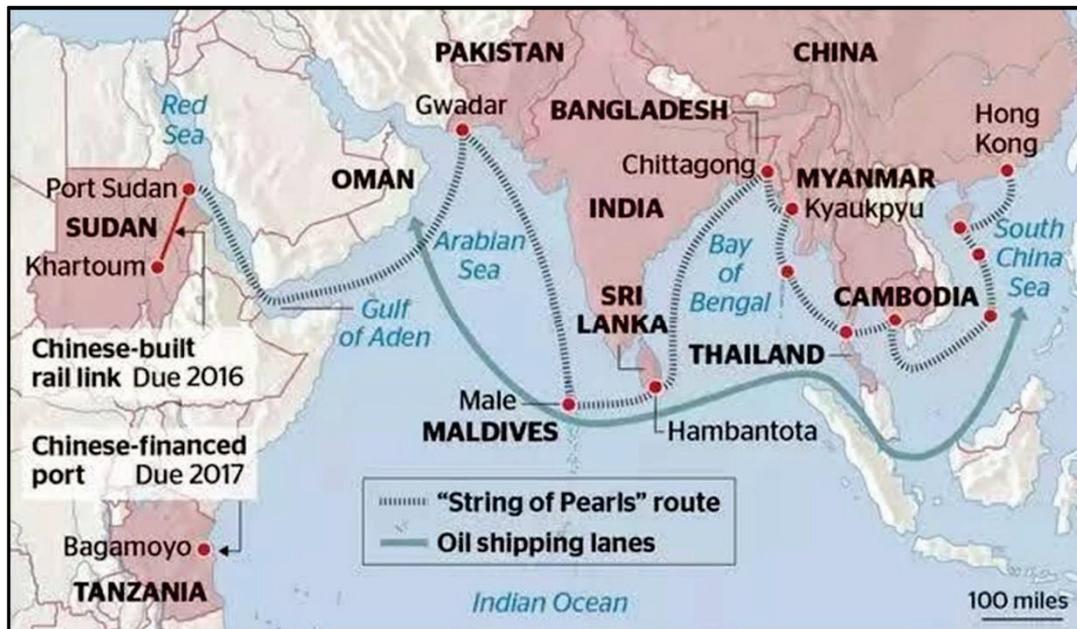
A paradigm change happened in 2011, when Mr. Thein Sein's new administration started enacting political and economic reforms and encouraged foreign investment. This was perceived by the international community as Myanmar's desire to decrease its dependency on China. As a result, the West removed the sanctions it had imposed, acknowledging these reforms as a step towards the foundation of democracy. However, as China had already invested more than \$13.3 billion in Myanmar by 2011, it was "too little, too late" While the rest of the world failed to seize this historic chance, China continued to be the most powerful nation in Myanmar, offering the country the political, military, and economic backing it required. As a result, China has become vital to Myanmar.

Myanmar's Importance for China

China considers Myanmar indispensable in its 'connectivity dilemma' to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). IOR is still a mystery to China, hence, it wants to increase its presence in the IOR for which Myanmar provides a good starting point. Additionally, Myanmar strengthens China's geopolitical objectives by providing a prime chance to China for India's military encirclement and as a counterbalance to its anxiety about the USA's growing influence along its southern border. China, on the other hand, faces a difficult situation in the Indo-Pacific Region with India, while simultaneously enjoying a strategic edge in the Pacific against the militarily powerful but far-off United States. As a result, China's maritime policy faces two significant obstacles that are likely to last until the PLA Navy achieves its 'world-class blue-water' status:

The inability to commit its naval forces to the Indian Ocean owing to the strategic significance of the Western Pacific.

Map 2: String of Pearls Route and Oil Shipping Lanes



Source: <https://launchpadeducation.in/string-of-pearls-strategy/>

In order to safeguard its Sea Lanes of Communication (SLoC), the Chinese Navy is not permitted to quickly redeploy into the Indian Ocean through the Malacca Strait, that connects the South China Sea with the Indian Ocean.

Myanmar is vital for China because of its lingering concern of "containment", which has led Beijing to build and manage port facilities spanning across Sihanoukville (Cambodia), Laem Chabang (Thailand), Kyaukphyu (Myanmar), Chittagong (Bangladesh), and Hambantota (Sri Lanka). China needs a peaceful border with Myanmar in order to prevent any spillover effects of Myanmar's internal instability.

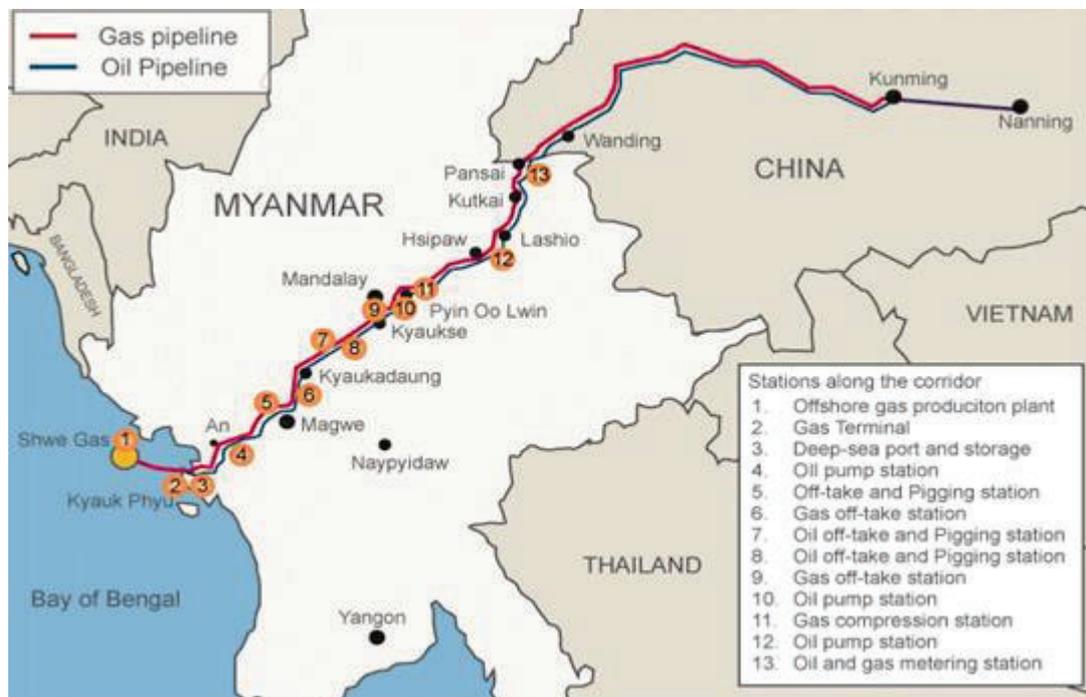
Geo-Economic Interests

Myanmar is an important connection for the revival of China's "South-West Silk Road", which stretched from the province of Yunnan to Myanmar and then westward to Bangladesh, India and the West. Myanmar is the only participant in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) other than Pakistan. Because of this, China is committed to building the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), and as such, it is making significant investments in mining

projects, oil and gas pipelines, hydropower dams, and infrastructure to support the growing energy demands of southern China and to get improved access to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar. In addition, Beijing has a \$7.3 billion plan for infrastructure development in Myanmar which includes building a deep seaport and developing the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone.

Kyaukphyu is currently connected to Western China by an operational US \$ 2.45 billion pipeline. Beijing's reliance on oil supplies, that currently traverses the Strait of Malacca, is intended to be reduced by the 793 km gas and 771 km oil pipeline, which secures a crucial route for Beijing to buy crude oil from the Middle East.

Map 3: China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC)



Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/2Tap3DgzYwb548KNA>

Although their connection seems mutually beneficial, Myanmar is more inclined to "give more" and "take less", according to semantics. China firmly supported military rule in Myanmar prior to democracy, despite heavy opposition from the West. China was alarmed by the emergence of democracy in Myanmar, but soon changed the course and continued to isolate Myanmar both militarily and economically, changing its approach to include democratic parties in politics more broadly rather than just working with the military exclusively. In the current era, China is back in supporting Myanmar, which is being again viewed by the West as an 'international pariah' because of the Rohingya problem and the coup d'état.

China, however, is cleverly taking advantage of this crucial time. Following the same course of action, China strengthened its footprint in Myanmar by using its Veto power and neutralising West' pressure on Myanmar during the trial for attacks on Rohingya's at UNSC.

Along with proposing the "three-phase" plan for resolving the Rohingya issue, China also helped to open talks between Bangladesh and Myanmar on the repatriation of Rohingya refugees. In addition, to constrain the ethnic armed groups from fighting the military junta, China has internally sponsored Myanmar's "21st Century Panglong Conferences", which was initiated by the NLD government to address the Country's protracted ethnic disputes (Peng, N. 2018). With these difficulties and an uninterested West, Myanmar has fewer choices. China is more than willing to provide Myanmar with the military backing and investments it so requires. As a result, Myanmar is forced to continue being unduly dependent on China. In addition, China's duty to provide a consistent, unwavering support weighs hard on Myanmar, making China, in principle, too powerful and dominant to be ignored. If the world does not act appropriately quickly, Myanmar will undoubtedly turn into a Chinese devotee.

Future Road Map

India maintained a more sensible foreign policy towards Myanmar since the early 1990s. But given the recent coup d'état, India finds itself in a similar predicament to 1962, and it must take care to avoid making the same mistakes twice.

Actions at the National Level. The strong relation between China and Myanmar is changing. Myanmar has become well aware that China's actions are consistent with its covert geopolitical influence, which is evident throughout the world. Africa is the best example of this debt-trap diplomacy pattern wherein infrastructure and development assistance are prioritised along with commodity extraction. In order to further its long-term objectives, India must take advantage of the general skepticism that exists in Myanmar regarding Chinese intentions and formulate practical policies.

Strong reactions to the coup d'état have drawn the prospect of sanctions from the West and the United States, which might cause unusual political realignments and push Myanmar's military regime to develop closer ties with China. Furthermore, a failing state like Myanmar can become a satellite of China, hence, increasing Chinese influence in regional affairs and bringing China more close to India. India would find it challenging to publicly support the junta given the strong western and American stance, even though working with whoever is in power in Myanmar would plainly be in its best interests under the new circumstances. Through its

updated AEP comprising the 4Cs— Culture, Commerce, Connectivity, and Capacity Building—India must actively and consistently engage with Myanmar.

With its “Buddhist Circuit” program, India hopes to increase foreign visitor arrivals from Burma, a predominantly Buddhist country, by connecting historic Buddhist heritage sites throughout Indian states. Myanmar stand to gain from India’s cultural diplomacy. Additionally, this endeavour builds on India’s diplomatic foundation of ‘trust and goodwill’. For Myanmar monks travelling to India, a programme without a visa may be implemented. A network of pilgrimage routes might act as catalysts for both countries' economies to expand. India should stay involved and look at all possible areas of collaboration, such as energy, infrastructure for security, and institution building. Trade and economic ties between the two nations would be strengthened by cooperation in several bilateral and multilateral fora, such as ASEAN, BIMSTEC, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), and South Asia Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC). The hinterland's economy will rebound as a result of the Northeast region's connection with Southeast and East Asia's fastest-growing economies.

India also needs to expand its influence into the mineral-rich Kachin state, which is adjacent to the Yunnan region of China. India has to understand how important Myanmar is for achieving its goal of becoming an economic superpower and as the entry point to Southeast Asia and the ASEAN region. In this regard, infrastructure projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway should be funded and completed within the sanctioned timeframe.

In order to bring democracy back to Myanmar, India should support the Pro democratic forces and, at the same time, maintain balanced relations with Tatmadaw. India will find it easier to handle its relations with Bangladesh and Myanmar and concentrate more on bilateral and sub-regional economic cooperation the sooner the Rohingya issue is settled. In the event of a full-scale military conflict with China in the eastern sector, the rebels, who have been at war with the Tatmadaw since the ceasefire agreement broke in 2021, can provide vital intelligence for India and may even strengthen India's so-called "Tibet card". It can facilitate access between Indian security personnel and the Arakan Army, which is fighting the Tatmadaw in Rakhine state. This could make a big difference in the real world and decide whether or not the KMMTTP is successful.

India might approach the other QUAD countries—the US, Japan, and Australia—for support in establishing capacity-building initiatives throughout Myanmar. Japan is working

harder to balance Chinese control over Myanmar through the Japan-Myanmar Association (JMA). Additionally, it is mediating a settlement between Tatmadaw and the rebels of the Arakan Army (AA). Lately, Japan consented to expand the problematic Dawei Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the Andaman Sea, which is connected to the Gulf of Thailand via road— It connects South Asia to South-East Asia and the Indian & Pacific oceans. The 200 km area will house the biggest industrial complex in South-East Asia if it was fully constructed. Japan's participation in this project may serve as an impetus for its own plan to establish the Japan Mekong Southern Economic Corridor, which would link southern Myanmar with Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. India can benefit from support from the United States and Australia in its endeavours to of capacity building in the fields of health, education, and agriculture, as well as in infrastructure development, particularly with respect to road connectivity in rural areas and education.

Conclusion

China and India have interests that overlap with Myanmar's natural resources and strategic importance. The regional power structure would be affected by China and India's ongoing struggle. Although China has always supported Myanmar throughout history, there is widespread mistrust in Myanmar regarding China's motivations— the interests of Beijing have a significant economic impact in Myanmar. China, on the other hand, has significant economic influence over Myanmar, leaving Myanmar with few options.

Myanmar's location at the geographic heart of Southeast Asia and India makes it important from a geopolitical standpoint. Its fundamental similarity is rooted on shared political experiences, cultural exchange, civilizational ties, and physical proximity.

One cannot overstate the military and geopolitical importance of Myanmar for India. India's security could be seriously threatened if China's footprints increases in Myanmar. Myanmar's size and economic appeal to India have also contributed to the country's relevance. With a population of less than 5% of India's total, Myanmar has a geographic area of almost 20% of India and an abundance of natural resources. India will never want a Chinese puppet to show up on its doorstep. Myanmar has so unintentionally become a "kingmaker" in India-China relations. As a result, it is in India's geostrategic interest for Myanmar to achieve Independence and stability since this will allow for more bilateral engagement in India-Myanmar relations.

Aware of the two powerful Asian neighbours, China and India, Myanmar is attempting to strike a balance. India is viewed as a trustworthy ally and "a friend" who will help balance

out China's growing influence. However, Myanmar perceives India's delayed and constrained strategic vision as a letdown. India's time appears to be running out, thus it must make seismic adjustments in how it engages Myanmar.

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