

## China Factor in India's Engagement with Myanmar

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### **Abstract:**

The paper is an attempt to analyse China as a factor in India's engagement with Myanmar. Located at a buffer between two powers viz., India and China, Myanmar is competing ground between them because of its geostrategic location and rich natural resources. Myanmar is strategically important for India for economic as well as security proposes. India and Myanmar got independence from British in 1947 and 1948. At the initial stage of independence both the countries maintain good and cordial relations. However, relations became strange when Ne Win stage a coup and captured power in 1962. Since then military ruled the country directly or indirectly till 2010. After the military came into power in 1962, the country remained aloof from international affairs and also isolates the country from foreign as well as regional affairs. In 1988 when mass demonstration took place in Myanmar to democratise the country, the military brutally suppressed the movement. During this time India and the international community came out openly and raised voice against the military. This gave China an opportunity to come closer with Myanmar. Automatically, Myanmar became too dependent on China economically and politically. Consequently, China's influence in Myanmar grows significantly and became a natural ally. India sees China's emergence in Myanmar and the Southeast Asia region as a competitor and threats to its national security. So, India starts acknowledging the importance of engaging with Myanmar to contain China's influence in the country and in the region. The paper argues that countering China's influence in Myanmar has been an important factor of India's engagement with Myanmar. The paper also tries to find out the reason why China's influence in Myanmar poses a threat to India's national security and why India is worry of China's increasing influence in Myanmar.

**Key words:** *India-Myanmar Relations, India's Policy towards Myanmar, Strategic importance of Myanmar, Military rule in Myanmar and China Factor.*

## Introduction

Geographically, Myanmar is located at the tri-junction of South, Southeast and East Asia. In South Asia it has border with Bangladesh and India, Laos and Thailand in Southeast Asia and China in East Asia. It has a population of 45 million and is the largest mainland in Southeast Asia's with an area of 676,577 sq km. It is very productive in agriculture and rich in natural resources including teak, oil, gas and precious and semi- precious stones. Myanmar is the largest Southeast Asia's natural gas reserves. It has oil reserves of around 600 million barrels. It is the tenth biggest gas reserves in the world estimated to be more than 90 trillion cubic feet. Buddhism, practiced by around 80 percent of its population is the main religion. Its economy is based on agriculture. The military government officially recognised 135 distinct ethnic groups divided into eight major "national ethnic races". Myanmar got its independence in January 4, 1948 from British colonialism. The country faced double colonialism from British and Japan. After its independence, Myanmar adopted for constitutional democracy and U Nu became the first prime minister. However, democracy ended in 1962 when military under Ne Win staged a coup in 1962. Since then the country was under military rule directly or indirectly till 2010. Transition to democracy started after the election and transfer of power to the newly elected government. However, the military still controlled Myanmar. And the country cannot be said fully democratic because 25 percent of the seats were reserved for the military.

## An Overview of the India-Myanmar Relationship

India and Myanmar enjoy a deep-rooted and multifaceted relationship. There is connectivity in terms of history, culture and religion between the two. Both were historically part of the extended British Empire in Asia. Myanmar was ruled under British India since 1886 till 1937. Buddhism which is widely practiced in Myanmar is also originated from India. During the struggle for independence, both cooperated with each other. After independence, the two countries shared close and cordial relations. They joined Non-Align movement (NAM) but Myanmar withdrew in 1979. The relation was shine during Jawaharlal Nehru and U Nu era. Both the countries also shared common understanding on various global and regional issues like Indonesian freedom from the Dutch and the Korean War. The two countries signed treaty of friendship in 1951. However, the relations started bitter when Ne Win staged a coup and captured power in 1962. After the coup, Myanmar became a military one-party regime under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Ne Win's policy of a "Burmese way

to Socialism” further hurt the interests of the people of Indian origin in Myanmar. Many people of Indian origin ran out from Myanmar. In the 1962 India-China war over the boundary issue, Myanmar take neutral stand, and India perceived Myanmar’s neutral position as support for China. However, during this period both the countries try to maintain relations at political level. Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri made a high level official visit to Myanmar in 1965 and signed boundary agreement in 1967. In 1969 Indira Gandhi paid a visit to Myanmar and in 1968 and 1970 Ne Win visited India. During Indira Gandhi visits, Ne Win made assurances that Myanmar would not allow any anti-Indian activities on its territory by any state or organisation (Singh, 2007). The relations further cool from the mid-1970s onwards. Relations reached its milestone in 1987 when Rajiv Gandhi made a first Indian prime-ministerial level visits to Myanmar since his mother visits in 1969. However, Rajiv Gandhi continued the idealist foreign policy towards Myanmar giving importance to democracy and condemned the undemocratic nature of the Burmese regime. During this period, India did not show much interest towards Myanmar because India was mainly focused on democratic value than the security concern. So, in 1988 when the military brutally crack down the pro-democratic movement, India raised its voice against the military and supported the democratic movement. India was the first and only Asian country to criticise the military in 1988. During the protest India has helped pro-democracy activists and provides financial support for democracy activists. India also established refugee camps in the two northeast states - Manipur and Mizoram, and the government-run All India Radio (AIR) began broadcasting Burmese language reports on the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) repression. After the 1990 election, India’s relations with Myanmar became more strained when the military refused to transfer power to the newly elected civilian government. India along with the west abandoned Myanmar. This led china an opportunity to come closer with Myanmar and become an ally. Automatically Myanmar became too dependent on China politically and economically. As a result of this, Indian security analysts and foreign policy circles began reviewing India’s policy towards Myanmar, fearing expanded Chinese influence in India’s neighbourhood (Singh, 2007). So, India started realising the importance of Myanmar and shifts its policy from idealism to realism to have deeper engagement with Myanmar. There are factors for the shift of India’s policy towards Myanmar in the 1990s such as end of cold war, to integrate with the economy of Southeast and East Asia, China’s increasing influence in Myanmar, security concern, to solve insurgency problem in northeast region and development of the region and Look East

Policy (LEP) now Act East Policy (AEP). So, India adopted a new pragmatic policy and started engaging with Myanmar with whatever the form of government that Myanmar has.

### **Importance of Myanmar for India**

Myanmar is important for strategic as well as geo-political reasons. It is the only Southeast Asian country which India shares land and maritime boundary and is the gateway to Southeast and East Asia. Due to its geographical location, Myanmar's domestic and foreign policies have impact on India's strategic interests such as the protection of India's territorial integrity in the northeastern region, India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal as well as the security of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It is the second largest nation amongst the Indian neighbours, the largest on its eastern flank that can provide the eastern littoral areas an access up to the Bay of Bengal Sea (Shivananda, 2011). Myanmar also shares border with Bangladesh to its northwest which is crucial for India as it provides an alternative route to Myanmar and Southeast Asia (Bhanu Singh, 2004). Because of its rich in natural resources, Myanmar is also very important to meet energy need in India. The country encompasses the immediate neighbourhood where India has command and a veto over the actions of outside powers (Majumdar, 2016).

Myanmar is also important for security reason. Political instability in Myanmar has impact on northeast region of India. Four Indian northeast states: Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram have border with Myanmar. The northeast states of India have been operating with many insurgent groups having their camps in the neighbouring countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar. An estimate of about 40 militants camps belonging to various northeast militant groups exist on Myanmar soil only (Sharma, 2010). So, cooperation with the neighbouring countries is of immense importance to solve the insurgencies problem in northeast. There is also trafficking of drugs and girls along the border. The northeastern states of India have strong cross border socio-cultural affinities with the ethnic groups of Myanmar. Therefore, political instability and unrest in Myanmar has strong connections insurgency movement in northeast.

There are many issues in India which cannot be solved alone and need Myanmar's help. So, India is interested in Myanmar ranging from factors such as development of northeast region of India, solving insurgency problem, countering China's influence in Myanmar and in Southeast Asian region, economic integration of India with Southeast and East Asia, accessing natural resources in Myanmar and AEP. Cooperation with Myanmar will also help India to emerge as a major Asian power. The importance of Myanmar became

more visible when India became a Sectoral Partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1992 and Myanmar became a member of ASEAN in 1997. The entry of Myanmar into ASEAN has thus provided India to go its maritime boundary with Southeast Asia.

### **India-China compete over Myanmar**

For Myanmar, the fundamental approach of authorities has been to engage in a balancing exercise between China and India (Bhatia, 2016). To Myanmar both India, China and other foreign powers are perceived to be craving for the country's natural resources- oil, gas, minerals, jade and precious stones, teak, rice and agricultural produce and even land (in case of China) (Bhatia, 2016). Myanmar has close connectivity with both India and China. Both India and China have cultural influences in Myanmar. Myanmar's geostrategic location as a tri-junction of South, Southeast and East Asia is of very significant for both the countries. China Myanmar shares 2,200 km border with easy access to each other. For China, "Myanmar is not only a potential supply route bypassing the Malacca Strait, but also a strategic staging point for controlling access to Malacca Strait's western approaches. So, access to Myanmar's ports and overland transportation routes through Myanmar is seen as a vital and strategic security asset for China (Zhao, 2008).

After Myanmar gained its independence in 1947, when Myanmar confronted a threat from Communist factions, it seeks help from India. During this period, India under Jawaharlal Nehru extended help and supply arms and saved the first democratic government of Myanmar. However, Myanmar after few years of independence showed activism in nurturing cordial ties with China. Both the countries followed the policy of peaceful co-existence till 1967. China supported Myanmar when the United Nations (UN) imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions. Myanmar is the first non-communist country to recognise the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Myanmar also supported the "One-China policy". Both the countries have also succeeded in solving the border dispute. However, the coup in 1962 under Ne Win hurt the relations not only with India but also with China.

Myanmar's relation with China was affected in 1968 when Burmese communists that enjoyed Chinese armed support captured a part of Myanmar's territory in the northeast. However, the relations improved in the 1970s. In 1978 Deng Xiaoping visited Myanmar. The international criticism of the military brutal crackdown of democratic movement in Myanmar in 1988 and the Tiananmen crisis in China in June 1989 further bring these two

countries closer. In the 1988 military crackdown of movement for democracy, India raised its voice against the military. The military brutal suppression of the mass movement for democracy and the refusal of power to the newly elected civilian government after the election in 1990 change the whole scenario of its relation with other countries. In the 1988 incidence in Myanmar, India adopted a policy to support the democratic movement which was opposite to China's policy of establishing close relation with the military. When India voiced against the military and supported democratic movement, China strengthened its political and security ties with the military regime. The military accused India of interfering in its internal affairs when many Burmese refugees were given shelter in India and this led the two countries of suspicion with each other. Relations between India and Myanmar further strained when India critic the military of not transferring power to the elected civilian government after the 1990 election. At this time India along with the West critic the military and abandoned the country. China on the other hand came out with huge investment and filled the vacuum left by the international community and become a crucial supplier of small arms, ammunitions, vehicles and navy ships to the Burmese Armed forces. This led to stronger Burmese Army which could pose new military threats at India's very doorstep (Egreteau, 2010). China's relation with Myanmar further grows. Chinese Communist Party general secretary and president of the state, Jiang Zemin, and his successor, Hu Jintao, paid a high-level dignitaries visit to Myanmar. As a reciprocal of that Myanmar also sent Than Shwe and Maung Aye, the chair and vice chair of the ruling SLORC/SPDC to Beijing. Both the countries also agreed bilateral contact which include the sale of Chinese armaments and machinery to the military junta, joint efforts to combat cross-border trafficking of narcotics, border trade of consumer goods, and Myanmar's exports of timber (largely through illicit smuggling) and precious stones to Yunnan, China's south-western province (Lee, 2009). China helped Myanmar to develop infrastructure such as dams, bridges, roads and railways and ports including the strategic road along the Irrawaddy River trade route linking Yunnan province to the Bay of Bengal. China has made huge investments in Myanmar with more than half of it in hydropower dam projects. China has built many roads to Sino-Myanmar border ports such as Jinghong-Da Menglong, Zhangfeng-Bhamo, Tengcheng-Banwa and Yingjing-Banwa. Both the countries also joined China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, Great Mekong Sub region Cooperation (GMS) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar regional cooperation (BCIM). In 1989 Chinese military delegation visited Myanmar to negotiate the purchase of arms including jet fighters, armoured vehicles and naval vessels. In 1993 China exported military equipment worth of \$1.4 billion to Myanmar. Consequently, China's



influence in the country increased and expanded its relation with Myanmar and automatically Myanmar became too depended on China. Myanmar started aware of the dangers of being too close to China. So, from the early 1990s, Myanmar has decided to adopt a 'counter hedging' strategy to reduce too much dependence on China and find India's influence an opportunity to counter with China's influence. As a result of this, Myanmar allows India to engage with the country. This also gives India an opportunity to counter with China because India perceived China's increasing influence in Myanmar as threat and fears encirclement by China due to its influence with Myanmar, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. So, Chinese supremacy in Myanmar is unacceptable to India. India and China are competing for Myanmar's favour for strengthening their strategic interests in the northeast areas of Indian Ocean. China wanted to protect its southern flank from Indian threats and requires access to the sea for transportation of goods for its land-locked southern provinces.

### ***China's interest in Myanmar***

*Myanmar is important to China because of its geo-strategic location. Through Myanmar China can access into the Indian Ocean and rich natural resources. There are many factors which prompted China in having close relations with Myanmar. Securing energy supplies is one of China's objectives towards Myanmar. China is dependent on foreign oil and approximately 80 percent of these oil imports currently passing through the Straits of Malacca. This strait is a natural checkpoint through which future enemies could cut off and for that matter China needs an alternative route. In this Myanmar plays an important geostrategic role which provides an alternative route to the Strait of Malacca. Myanmar also holds an important geographic location for China as it is the land bridge for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to reach the India Ocean through Myanmar-controlled Coco Islands. China's policy towards Myanmar emphasised on ensuring stable external environment with Myanmar.*

*China also has interest for the economic development of its landlocked Yunnan which shares border with Myanmar more than 2,000 km-long and for the security and peace of its southern borders. For this, Myanmar provides a gateway to restore its southwest Silk Road from Yunnan province to Myanmar and westward to Bangladesh, India and the West. However, India is wary of China's increasing influence in Myanmar. So, India's policy makers realised that if official statements kept on criticizing Myanmar's military then its*

*relations with Myanmar will be bitter and China will find an opportunity to come closer with Myanmar.*

### **India's policy of engagement**

India's policy of engagement with Myanmar stems from the fact that the country holds an important geostrategic location. Its policy of engaging with Myanmar is governed by the factors such as increasing economic ties with Southeast Asia region, seeking Myanmar's cooperation in solving insurgents and development of northeast states, AEP and checking China's influence in Myanmar.

After 1988, when Myanmar was isolated and sanction from international community China came out with huge development aid and became largest provider of aid. China-Myanmar co-operation grew to include economic, military and infrastructure development. This has facilitated military expansion and rearmament in Myanmar with China. Subsequently, China-Myanmar trade bloomed and China's investment in Myanmar benefits China in its goal of using Myanmar as "a corridor for the southward flow of Chinese goods". India viewed this development with suspicion and turned the suspicion into threat. Before 1990s India did not show much interest towards Myanmar and followed idealism. Its policy towards Myanmar was focused on democratic value rather than security concern. In the early 1990s, India changed its policy from idealism to realism and adopted for engagement with the military to counter Chinese influence in Myanmar. India started focussing on engaging with the military as well as support for democracy. So, India decided to follow a policy of "constructive engagement" with Myanmar, abandoning its earlier stance of isolating military regime. In 1992 a Burmese delegation visited India and expressed concern over the growing Sino-Myanmar co-operation. In March 1993, India's Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit visited Myanmar one month after Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen's visit, and discussed Indian concerns with Myanmar's military co-operation with China. The visit shows India's interests to engage with Myanmar. The coming up of regional organistaion such as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) enabled India to get closer to Myanmar. In January 1994, Myanmar's Deputy Foreign Minister visited India and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to increase co-operation and prevent "illegal and insurgent activities". Both the countries also signed India-Myanmar Trade Treaty to expand border trade. India's policy change was prompted by China's economic growth and increased influence in Myanmar. J.N. Dixit in 2000 argued that the main reason for the review of Indo-Myanmar



relations was “Myanmar’s geostrategic importance for India”, pointing out the shared border with the Indian north-east, China and Bangladesh, as well as its relevance for Indian security interests in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. So, it was India’s interest to ensure that Myanmar is not influenced by China. India’s changed of its policy was also evidenced when India did not raise its voice against the military crackdown on the pro-democratic movement led by Buddhist monks in September 2007 unlike in 1988 even though US asked India to be more active in pressing for democracy in Myanmar. India at this says that democracy and human rights are Myanmar’s internal affairs.

### **China Factor**

India has long border issues with China since independence which lead to war and faced defeat from China in 1962. So, “given India's long adversarial relationship with China, anything that promotes China's interests in its immediate neighbourhood, or expands China's influence, worries India (Malik, 1994). Since 1988 China has been Myanmar’s closest ally. Myanmar’s economy is increasingly linked with Chinese economy and flooded with Chinese goods. China also dominates oil and gas exploration and mining sectors, and has a large presence in the infrastructural development and hydro power projects. With all this, India changes its economic and political equations that protect its interests with that of China. To achieve this aim India need to have good relations and engaged with Myanmar with any form of government that the country has. There are many reasons for India wary of China’s influence in Myanmar. India is wary of Chinese influence in Myanmar and in the Indian Ocean. China on the other hand is wary of India control of Indian Ocean Region and its potential to fuel conflict in Tibet. India is concerned with China’s control and influence in Coco Island which is located just 40 km from the Landfall Islands in the northern most part of the Andamans. China and Myanmar have built a triangle-shaped series of four naval bases connecting Coco Island, Haigyi island, Mergui and Thilawa. Since 1994, Chinese security agencies are suspected to be conducting electronic-intelligence and maritime reconnaissance from this Coco Island (Shivananda, 2011). With the Coco Islands on lease from Myanmar, China can access the Indian Ocean and will facilities to not only watch the naval activities on the eastern coast of India but also to spy on India’s missile launching program. China’s influence in Myanmar can also disturb India’s maritime strategic calculations as China can access the Arabian Sea via Pakistan’s Gwadar port. China is also assisting Myanmar to develop its naval bases in Sittwe, Hianggyi, Khaukphyu, Mergui and Zadetkyikyan by building radar and refuelling facilities that could help Chinese submarine operations in the

Bay of Bengal (Singh, 2007). A General of the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences has spoken of the Chinese Navy extending its naval operations into the Indian Ocean in order to prevent Indian Ocean becoming “Indian Ocean” and as such sought strategic outposts on Myanmar islands (Bhanu Singh, 2004). So, China is enhancing its influence in Myanmar to check and counter India. With this regards Shivananda said that “India also needs to treat the Chinese strategy of encirclement especially through Myanmar as a threat and monitor Chinese military capability enhancement through strategic ties (Shivananda, 2011).” So, China factor has motivates India’s to change its policy from idealism to realism to engage with the military.

There are also factors for India’s engagement with Myanmar such as development of northeast, solving problem of insurgencies in the northeast states, (AEP), accessing resources from Myanmar, reaching Southeast Asia market and China’s increasing influence in Myanmar. Sunniva Engh pointed out some factors for India’s engagement with Myanmar: broader changes in Indian foreign policy, economy outlook, end of the Cold War, transformation of the global order necessitated thorough changes in Indian foreign policy and economy, collapse of India’s close ally the Soviet Union (USSR), face of an unprecedented fiscal crisis, liberalising economy, reorientation of the Indian foreign policy to be more active stand in international and regional politics, LEP (Engh, 2016). He further pointed out two factors causes the change in recent Indian foreign and security policy – China’s increased influence in India’s neighbourhood and the end of the Cold War – led to significant changes in India’s Myanmar policy in the early 1990s.

### ***Conclusion***

India and China has been contesting for regional hegemony and find Myanmar an important goe-strategic position to fulfill their aim. So, both India and China try to increase their influence over Myanmar to achieve their interest. China always try to maintain good relations with Myanmar with whatever the form of government Myanmar has while India at the beginning focus on idealism but shift its policy to realism in the early 1990s. So, since 1993 India has adopted policy of constructive engagement to have deeper relations with Myanmar with whatever the form of government that Myanmar has. However, India is very slow and lack strategic vision in dealing its relation with Myanmar. Therefore, India could not fully achieve its goal of deeper engagement although India adopted policy of constructive engagement. But, China in dealing with its relation with Myanmar provides policy of continuity and political stability with clear and long term strategic framework. India to have

better engagement with Myanmar should focus on long term vision and used soft power and focused on connectivity.

There is thrust deficit between India and China. Both the countries are suspicion of each other. So, influence in Myanmar by one country is perceived as threat and vice-versa. India perceived China's inroads into Myanmar since 1990, the build-up of naval facilities in the Bay of Bengal and its possible use by the Chinese military as encroachments into India's sphere of influence and perceived increasing Chinese influence in Myanmar as threat. Likewise China perceived India's influence as undermining its interest. To protect each other national security, both try to increase their influence in Myanmar and this on the other hand lead to unending competition. However, cooperation between the India and China will bring more prosperous for both instead of competition. So, both India and China should look forward to cooperate with each other in order to gain maximum out of it.

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