



Forming Indo-Myanmar Relations: An Analysis

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Abstract

Due to factors including shared strategic objectives, historical ties, and geographic proximity, India and Myanmar's relationship has changed over time. The main elements influencing Indo-Myanmar ties are examined in this paper, along with their political dynamics, economic collaboration, and security considerations. In the past, the relationship has fluctuated between times of harmony and conflict due to changes in India's foreign policy objectives and the domestic political climate in Myanmar.

India considers Myanmar to be an essential partner in its “Act East” program, which seeks to improve trade routes and promote regional connectivity due to Myanmar's important location as a bridge connecting South and Southeast Asia. This analysis looks at the ways that India and Myanmar have strengthened their economic relations by working together on infrastructure projects, especially in border areas. Because they face similar difficulties in preserving regional peace, security cooperation—in particular, counterinsurgency and border management—remains a pillar of their bilateral relationship.

Additionally, the paper explores how important international actors—particularly China—affect relations between India and Myanmar. India finds it difficult to strike a balance between its strategic interests and Myanmar's growing reliance on Chinese investments. The prospects for future cooperation between India and Myanmar are examined in this analysis's conclusion, with an emphasis on opportunities for both countries' economies to flourish, their strategic alignment, and the advancement of regional stability.

Key Words: *Indo-Myanmar relations, political dynamics, economic cooperation, and security concerns*

Introduction

Relations between India and Myanmar have a long and complicated history that has been affected by centuries of political, economic, and cultural exchanges. Myanmar is an important neighbour in terms of trade and security because of its advantageous location between India and Southeast Asia. The two countries share a 1,643-kilometer border. Over the past few decades, there have been substantial advancements in the relationship between India and Myanmar, reflecting changes in regional dynamics as well as security and

economic interests. This article examines the major influences on the Indo-Myanmar relationship, as well as contemporary issues and potential outcomes.

India and Myanmar have longstanding cultural and historical connections that go back thousands of years. Rich cultural exchanges were made possible by the movement of products, people, and ideas along land routes and the Bay of Bengal. Up until 1937, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) was administratively regarded as a part of British India during the British colonial era. Cultural and religious linkages thrived, and Indian labour and trade were important in Burma during this period, solidifying numerous relationships.

After gaining independence in 1947, India initially maintained a strong relationship with Myanmar. However, the relationship took a turn after Myanmar's 1962 military coup, which isolated the country and caused tensions, particularly over India's support for democratic movements in Myanmar.

Key Pillars of Indo-Myanmar Relations

1. Economic and Trade Relations

India and Myanmar's economic ties have picked up steam recently, as seen by a notable increase in bilateral commerce. One of Myanmar's main commercial partners is India, especially when it comes to consumer goods, pharmaceuticals, and agriculture. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which attempts to enhance connection between India's northeastern states and Myanmar's Sittwe port, is one of the infrastructure projects in which India has also participated.

Additionally, Myanmar is a key player in the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, and India is keen to integrate Myanmar into its "Act East" policy to improve connectivity and economic integration with Southeast Asia. Investments in energy, especially in oil and gas, are also a significant component of economic ties, given Myanmar's rich natural resources.

2. Security and Strategic Cooperation

India and Myanmar are both concerned about security issues, especially in light of drug trafficking and rebel activity along their shared border. To combat rebel organizations that operate in border regions, the two nations have collaborated.

Because Myanmar is essential to India's Look East and Act East policies, it plays a key role in the country's regional security. To counter China's increasing influence in the area, India has to keep Myanmar stable. Due to its closeness to the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, Myanmar is also a key component in India's maritime security plan.

3. Development Assistance and Connectivity

India has been providing Myanmar with development support through a number of infrastructural, healthcare, and education projects. India has also been assisting Myanmar in strengthening its democratic and governance institutions, particularly since the country's 2011 political shift. Enhancing regional connectivity is the goal of initiatives like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which will facilitate easier and more effective trade and travel between South and Southeast Asia.

4. Cultural and People-to-People Ties

Cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts have always been a cornerstone of Indo-Myanmar relations. Both countries share religious ties, as Buddhism is prominent in both cultures. Various Indian cultural organizations have been active in Myanmar, and programs that promote language, literature, and arts further cement these ties.

Additionally, a considerable population of people of Indian origin resides in Myanmar, particularly in urban centres like Yangon and Mandalay. Their presence and influence contribute to the strong historical and cultural ties between the two nations.

Challenges in Indo-Myanmar Relations

1. Political Instability in Myanmar

The political unrest in Myanmar presents a serious obstacle to its relations with India. Following the military's takeover in February 2021, there have been several demonstrations, acts of violence, and international outcry. India has advocated for a peaceful conclusion to the situation, but its strategic interests have prevented it from adopting a tough posture.

2. China's Influence in Myanmar

For India, China's influence in Myanmar has been a big worry. China is the biggest economic partner of Myanmar and a significant investor in infrastructure initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative's China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. China's increasing influence in Myanmar has India concerned since it may curtail its own might and muddle the dynamics of regional security.

3. Insurgency and Cross-Border Crime

Because the border between India and Myanmar is frequently hard to patrol and manage, traffickers and militant organizations have been able to operate with impunity. The stability and security of India's northeastern states have been impacted by cross-border insurgency, and India and Myanmar have been collaborating to combat this danger. Coordination and cooperation, however, still need to be improved.

Prospects for Future Cooperation

Despite challenges, there are ample opportunities for India and Myanmar to strengthen their relationship. Both countries can benefit from deepened economic ties, improved security cooperation, and enhanced connectivity projects. Myanmar's strategic location makes it essential for India's regional strategy, while India provides Myanmar with a counterbalance to China's influence.

India is expected to refrain from directly meddling in Myanmar's internal political affairs in the near future while continuing to promote democratic processes in that country. Investing in connection initiatives, fostering cultural exchanges, and improving trade partnerships will continue to be priority areas. The security, economic, and political climate of the larger South and Southeast Asian regions will be significantly influenced by the changing relationship between India and Myanmar.

- **Shared Heritage:** India and Myanmar share a long history of cultural and religious exchanges. Buddhism, a major religion in Myanmar, has historical roots in India, and this cultural connection has often served as a foundation for people-to-people interactions.
- **Colonial History:** Both countries share a colonial past under British rule, which has influenced their political and administrative systems. Post-independence, India and Myanmar initially had amicable relations based on shared experiences of colonialism and mutual support during the Non-Aligned Movement.

2. Economic Cooperation

- **Trade and Investment:** India is one of Myanmar's significant trading partners, particularly as a buyer of agricultural products like pulses. Bilateral trade has grown over the years, but there is room for improvement. Key areas include pharmaceuticals, textiles, and agriculture.
- **Connectivity Projects:** India has been actively involved in developing infrastructure projects aimed at improving connectivity. Projects like the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway aim to enhance trade and transportation links, facilitating regional economic integration.
- **Energy Cooperation:** Myanmar is rich in natural resources, especially natural gas, which India seeks to tap into to meet its growing energy needs. Indian companies have invested in Myanmar's energy sector, which has also helped Myanmar develop its energy infrastructure.

3. Geopolitical and Strategic Considerations

- **China's Influence:** China has traditionally wielded considerable influence in Myanmar, both economically and strategically. India is keen on counterbalancing China's presence and influence in the region. Myanmar's strategic location makes it an important player in this regional balance of power.

- **Northeast India Security Concerns:** India shares a long border with Myanmar, particularly with its northeastern states. There are concerns about insurgent groups operating across the border. Enhanced cooperation between the two nations, including joint operations, has been crucial for India to maintain stability in its northeastern region.
- **Act East Policy:** Myanmar is central to India's "Act East" policy, which aims to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian countries. As a gateway to ASEAN, Myanmar plays a crucial role in India's efforts to enhance connectivity, trade, and diplomatic ties with the broader Southeast Asian region.

4. Military and Défense Cooperation

- **Border Security:** India and Myanmar have engaged in joint military exercises and shared intelligence to combat cross-border insurgency and maintain border security. Regular high-level visits and dialogues on defense cooperation are held between the two countries.
- **Counterterrorism:** Both countries face the threat of insurgency and terrorism. Counterterrorism cooperation, particularly in the border regions, is vital for maintaining peace and security. India's assistance in capacity-building for Myanmar's military is part of this cooperative framework.

5. Humanitarian and Development Assistance

- **Capacity Building and Training:** India has been involved in capacity-building initiatives in Myanmar, providing training and technical support to Myanmar's civil services and other sectors. This fosters goodwill and strengthens bilateral ties.
- **Healthcare and Education:** India has extended assistance to Myanmar's healthcare and education sectors, including offering scholarships to students from Myanmar and medical aid, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Challenges and Opportunities

- **Political Instability:** Myanmar's political instability, particularly following the 2021 military coup, poses challenges for India's diplomatic and strategic objectives. India has taken a cautious approach, balancing its interests without directly interfering in Myanmar's internal politics.
- **Rohingya Crisis:** The Rohingya refugee crisis, which has regional security and humanitarian implications, presents a complex challenge for India. India has been criticized for its handling of Rohingya refugees but has maintained a policy of non-interference in Myanmar's internal affairs.
- **Expanding Economic Ties:** With Myanmar being rich in natural resources and offering new market opportunities, India has an opportunity to deepen economic ties. However, this requires navigating Myanmar's complex political landscape and balancing China's influence in the region.

Conclusion

Indo-Myanmar relations are shaped by a complex interplay of historical, cultural, economic, and strategic factors. While there are challenges, such as Myanmar's political instability and China's influence, India has adopted a pragmatic approach. Enhanced cooperation in trade, infrastructure, defence, and humanitarian assistance remains essential for fostering a stable and mutually beneficial relationship. The strengthening of Indo-Myanmar relations is not only vital for India's "Act East" policy but also for maintaining regional stability and prosperity.

Indo-Myanmar relations are rooted in historical, cultural, and strategic factors that shape the ongoing partnership between the two nations. While challenges such as political instability and regional security concerns persist, there is substantial potential for cooperation that could benefit both countries. By strengthening ties in areas such as trade, security, and connectivity, India and Myanmar can work towards a stable and prosperous regional future.

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