



India's Neighbourhood

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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8. The India-Myanmar Affair: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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Introduction

For India, Myanmar has always been an important piece of the geopolitical puzzle. As a country sharing a long land border of more than 1,600 km and an even longer history of imperial conquests, colonialism and anti-colonialism, Myanmar (or Burma) is intimately tied to India in more than one way.

The relationship, as it came into its own in the post-colonial period, quickly became rife with paradox. Despite their analogous pasts, they gradually moved away from each other through the second half of the last century. As Myanmar fell into the hands of a military dictator fourteen years after it gained independence from the British, its bilateral history with India became a palimpsest where shared memories of anti-imperialist struggle, mass migration and mutual understanding came to be steadily replaced by a bitter tale of ethno-nationalism, xenophobia and distrust. But, the India-Myanmar affair has always had a way of finding its way through the dark. Aided by broader geopolitical shifts, India began to rewrite its Burma story with the end of the Cold War. Since then, New Delhi has methodically developed and practised a diplomatic approach that, in many ways, is a derivative of its broader geopolitical strategy of non-alignment. In a more regional context, it was driven by another key determinant of Indian foreign policy: keeping China at bay.

From a strictly *realpolitik* perspective, India's balanced diplomacy in Myanmar has provided much resilience and stability in the relationship

against a background of rapid political changes in Myanmar. This is evidenced by the historic surge in levels of bilateral cooperation over the last decade, propelled partly by New Delhi's renewed eastward push under the Act East Policy (AEP). But, this is just one way of looking at this complex story. Despite the stability that India found in its neutrality, several factors continued to play spoilsport. Despite growing cooperation between both countries, the border continues to be a weak link for India even today. Further, since Myanmar relapsed into authoritarian military rule in February 2021 after almost a decade of experimenting with parliamentary democracy, India's "tightrope diplomacy" has been struggling to keep up with the complex new realities. These headwinds aren't going anywhere. In fact, they will become stronger as civil-military tensions reach a fever pitch in a Myanmar that appears to be at the cusp of radical political transformation.

The chapter outlines three aspects of the India-Myanmar relationship: the trajectory in recent history (1948-present), the key priorities and challenges, and the post-coup context. Towards the end, it offers a foresight into the future horizons of the relationship, and some potential policy approaches that India can take to create a progressive foreign policy on Myanmar. The analysis relies on a mix of secondary sources, including government publications, archival material, journal articles, and media reports.

Through the Decades

As India and Burma emerged from colonial rule in 1947 and 1948, respectively, they found a common platform to build a meaningful bilateral relationship, based primarily on the powerful memory of a shared nationalist struggle against British colonialism. This was complemented by their analogous visions for anti-imperialism, non-alignment and peaceful coexistence. Two other factors played a critical role in taking the relationship further: personality-based intimacies; and diasporic relations. First, the personal rapport between India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Burmese nationalist hero (and father of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi), General Aung San,

and independent Burma's first Prime Minister, U Nu, brought both countries closer on more-than-political terms.¹ Second, the fact that on the morning of Burmese independence, some 300,000 to 400,000 Indians were residing in the country, showed the depth of people-to-people linkages between both countries even before they established formal relations.²

The congruence of visions was codified in the Treaty of Friendship signed by both countries in 1951, following which they decided to base their relationship on *Panchsheel*—or the five virtues of mutual existence—pioneered by Nehru, U Nu and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai.³ Thus, began a period of bilateralism driven by “Nehruvian idealism”—a core foreign policy framework whose exact normative contours remain a subject of scholarly debate, but one that emerged as a response to both colonialism, and inter-war and post-war rivalries.⁴ In the Myanmar context, it was a rough aggregate of respect for democratic institutions, non-alignment, pan-Asian solidarity, and mutual respect. India managed to sustain this approach for more than three decades, despite severe headwinds from the other side.

The 1950s was a largely smooth decade for India and Burma, despite the internal upheavals in both. It was during this period that certain core elements and dependencies in the India-Myanmar relationship began to emerge across the political, economic and security spectra. The Nehru government extended generous amounts of assistance—both military and economic—to help the U Nu government stabilise the country.⁵ India also empathetically supported the U Nu government at the UN when the latter feared a Chinese invasion.⁶ However, early signs of an adverse shift in the relationship began emerging in 1960 when General Ne Win—who was then leading a caretaker government—signed a friendship and mutual non-aggression treaty with China, which triggered alarm bells in New Delhi.⁷ Notably, despite the Nehru-U Nu equation, the India-Burma bilateral wasn't robust enough to weather major directional shifts, which the Chinese were aware of. One cable from the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi sent to Beijing on January 1, 1962 described the relationship as “lukewarm”.⁸

Things took a sharp turn southward when General Ne Win initiated a military coup in 1962 and conjured a one-party, socialist authoritarian state using his so-called ‘Burmese Road to Socialism’. An aggressive economic nationalisation drive, undergirded in large parts by ethnonationalist xenophobia, followed. Foreigners and those of non-Burmese stock were driven away. This dealt the hardest blow to the large ethnic Indian community in Burma, particularly “Indian chettyars, landlords, and the big financiers,” resulting in a “complete disruption” in the India-Myanmar relationship.⁹

However, here’s the fascinating bit about India-Myanmar relationship under Ne Win, which speaks of the fundamentally dichotomous and arguably resilient nature of the bilateral relations: despite these chauvinistic policies, both countries continued to maintain contact. As pointed out by scholars, the relationship began to “regain its formal cordiality” after 1964, driven by a mix of two key factors: Burma’s economic dependence on India; and rifts in the Burma-China relationship (peaking during the 1967 anti-Chinese riots in Burma), which New Delhi was willing to exploit.¹⁰ Thereafter, there was a series of high-level reciprocal state visits. In fact, the Ne Win government granted Burmese citizenship to 60,000 foreigners, the majority of whom were Indians, when Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited Burma in 1969.¹¹

Thus, while some scholars argue that India was “largely neutral and disinterested” in Myanmar and prioritised “commitment to democratic values” ahead of “security concerns” during this period,¹² the reality was more complex—there was a strong *realpolitik* colour to the relationship till the late 1980s. It is during this period that Nehru’s “idealism” began to metamorphose into “realism” or what scholars later called “pragmatism”—shaped by the overwhelming political, strategic and economic exigencies of both parties.¹³ 1988 proved to be a watershed year as it triggered a chain of events that led to a critical transformation of India’s approach to Myanmar. That year, massive protests against Ne Win’s rule gripped Myanmar, following the regime’s decision to demonetise its currency.¹⁴ As expected, the regime violently crushed the demonstrations, killing thousands and forcing many more to flee to ethnic minority regions and

also across the border to India. The Rajiv Gandhi government openly rallied against the Rangoon government and embraced political activists seeking shelter in India.¹⁵ India even joined the US-led Western bloc at the UN in condemning the Burmese regime.

However, this turned out to be a short-lived spurt of idealism that soon faded into the background (and never really came back). By 1991, New Delhi, realising that its pro-democratic stance had pushed Rangoon away, changed gears and began talking to the newly-formed junta, despite the military putting Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest in 1998 and dismissing the results of the general election next year, which saw her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), win a majority. Thus, began an era of 'constructive engagement', as former Indian Foreign Secretary, JN Dixit, noted.¹⁶ It was predominantly driven by India's economic and security interests under the newly-minted 'Look East Policy' (LEP) and only lightly seasoned by a normative support for democracy.¹⁷ The junta too was willing to build bridges with its powerful western neighbour.

Through this decade, there were several high-level mutual bilateral visits—at least twelve of them after 1994—which resulted in both countries inking multiple deals in the domains of border security, trade, and development.¹⁸ India also distanced itself from the US-led position against the junta at the UN. It worked both ways, with New Delhi giving international legitimacy to the new Burmese junta in exchange for preservation of its cross-border interests. It was *realpolitik quid pro quo* at its text-book best (or worst). This 'pragmatism', needless to say, didn't sit well with everyone in Burma. Although India continued to shelter Burmese opposition figures during this period and occasionally called on the junta to restore democracy, the democrats in Myanmar felt raw about New Delhi's resurgent closeness with the generals.¹⁹

In the first decade of the century, India inked a raft of bilateral agreements with the junta, covering a range of domains such as security and hydroelectric power, remote-sensing technology, and Buddhist statues.²⁰ As Bibhu Prasad Routray noted succinctly, "A clear realisation had dawned upon New Delhi that India's national interest is best served by a strong and stable Myanmar that observes strict neutrality between

India and China and also cooperates with India in the common fight against insurgencies raging in the border areas of both countries.”²¹ During this period, Indian neutrality began to look a lot like China’s pro-junta position—a pattern that haunts Indian policy on Myanmar even today. For instance, both India and China voted against a 2007 United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution condemning the junta’s brutal crackdown on peaceful protestors and calling for the release of Suu Kyi.²² As Myanmar formally became a quasi-democracy in 2011 and then a negotiated parliamentary democracy in 2016, India maintained its dual approach to keep both the civilian and military power centres in its good books. There were calls from sections of the Indian commentariat for India to eschew its “middle-path policy” and write a “whole new script”, but that didn’t happen.²³ New Delhi assessed that while Suu Kyi had become a decisive political force in Myanmar, the military still commanded strong influence over the state. At the same time, India knew that Myanmar was opening up like never before and it didn’t want to miss out on the moment to invest in the country’s future.

But, as the second half of the transitional decade would show, the cost of this *realpolitik* and somewhat utilitarian approach was a stiff compromise with the principles of human rights and democracy. The Indian line on Myanmar hit a wall as the Suu Kyi government faced an unprecedented political crisis at home and civil-military relations tanked. India’s “time-tested” diplomatic script remains largely unchanged today, despite the military clawing back power in a violent and highly-unpopular coup in February 2021. One cannot say with much assurance that this script guarantees a stable future for India in Myanmar.

Key Priorities and Challenges

For India, Myanmar is important in two ways: as a link or ‘gateway’ to Southeast Asia; and as a neighbour sharing a long land-cum-maritime border while sitting inside China’s sphere of influence. In combination, they create a certain imperative for New Delhi to maintain a strong politico-economic footprint in the country through a mix of developmental strategies, security cooperation and commercial outreach.

Indian priorities in Myanmar, as we know them today, began to take shape in the early years of the post-colonial period, but consolidated only in the early 1990s with the launch of India's LEP. During this period, as Renaud Egretreau argues, New Delhi shifted its attention towards Burma to secure greater strategic and commercial access in the Indian Ocean maritime domain with the broader aim of challenging "China's thrust southwards".²⁴ This was accompanied by a desire to build strong economic linkages with all Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) while also "opening up" India's North-Eastern Region (NER) to development.²⁵ In 2011, Routray had identified five key drivers of this realist approach, which continue to occupy a central position in India's Myanmar strategy even today: continued influence of the military, growing presence of China, quest for energy, northeastern insurgency and looking east.²⁶

In 2014, the Narendra Modi government upgraded the LEP to the Act East Policy (AEP) in an attempt to provide a fresh policy impetus to the eastward push. The government also began to emphasise on a 'Neighbourhood First Policy' in its foreign policy narrative.²⁷ These moves were accompanied by renewed energy around the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which was severely plagued by a decaying diplomatic focus.²⁸ Without doubt, these multi-level policy initiatives gave a new lease of life to the India-Myanmar relationship, which had already entered a new phase as the latter began to transition into a democracy around 2010. Since then, there have been at least 13 high-level visits from the Indian side to Myanmar, including two visits by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and two by State Counsellor Suu Kyi since 2014.²⁹

Today, Indian priorities in Myanmar can be divided into three broad clusters: development; security and defence; and trade and commerce. These key categories may be further split into sector-specific areas such as oil and gas, hydropower, development aid, projects, humanitarian assistance, military-to-military cooperation, and others.³⁰ According to an interview-based study by Pierre Gottschlich published in 2017, "security in India's northeast" and "bilateral trade relations" are the topmost

policy priority areas for India in Myanmar, followed by the “question of connectivity.”³¹ Most long-time observers and scholars of Myanmar in India would concur with these. In the context of the last decade, however, defence and security priorities have taken greater prominence, with the trade, connectivity and commerce agendas moving at a sluggish pace. Even on defence and security, India’s approach remains vulnerable to serious volatilities owing to the lingering political instability inside Myanmar, especially after the February 2021 coup.

Border, Defence and Beyond

From the Indian vantage point, the NER-Myanmar trans-border space forms what Barry Buzan and Ole Waever called a “regional security complex” or “subcomplex” wherein the security environment on one side of the border is intimately tied to the security environment on the other side.³² Geographically, India’s road to Myanmar passes through the former’s NER. It is also from the NER that the Indian state has traditionally faced some of its strongest security challenges to its nation-building project—mostly in the form of ethnic insurgencies fuelled by a mix of political, social and economic discontents. This complex overlap of two realities has driven the Indian state to develop a highly securitised view of the NER-Myanmar trans-border space, wherein strong relations with Myanmar’s power centres are seen as a prerequisite for stability in the NER.

India’s approach to its border with Myanmar is largely a reflexive response to the fact that Indian Insurgent Groups (IIGs) in the NER have persistently exploited the porosity of the India-Myanmar border to expand and consolidate their operational space. By building bases on Burmese territory, particularly in remote regions beyond the direct control of successive regimes in Rangoon and Naypyitaw, these groups have used Myanmar as their strategic backyard for operations against the Indian security forces. India, on its part, has believed that this problem can be managed only by working closely with the Burmese security establishment. According to former Indian Ambassador to Myanmar, Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, “To some extent this is part of a secular

trend in favour of greater reliance on the security state over democratic aspirations after [India's] bitter experience with the LTTE in Sri Lanka and the suppression of the pro-democracy agitation in Myanmar in the late 1980s.”³³ With the Burmese military gaining better control of its border regions from the 1990s, New Delhi sought “cooperation from the Burmese regime to ‘contain’ or ‘eliminate’” the IIGs.³⁴ To this end, India supplied a range of military hardware—Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs), machine guns, and even ten T-55 tanks—to the Burmese Army.³⁵ However, there is little evidence to suggest that the Burmese forces used these in any major counter-insurgency drive against the IIGs before the last decade.

In 2010, India signed a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) with Myanmar to consolidate bilateral cooperation in the areas of counter-insurgency and illegal trafficking of drugs and arms.³⁶ Another aspect of the Indian state's anxiety over the border are the successive waves of asylum seekers who have crossed over to India due to political and economic instability inside Myanmar. This triggered cycles of securitised responses from New Delhi in the form of greater deployment of forces from the Assam Rifles to secure the border. This security-heavy thinking remains central to New Delhi's policy on Myanmar even today, despite a steady decline in insurgent activity along the border regions. The rise in attendant criminal activities—such as drugs and arms smuggling—has provided further impetus to this approach. The fresh wave of refugees that poured into India through the border after the February 2021 coup has only reanimated these anxieties over the border.³⁷

In the current context, two key insurgent ecosystems—the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and Manipuri IIGs—continue to straddle the border and pose a challenge to India's eastward push. India, on its part, has continued to work with the Myanmar military for two distinct goals: to keep insurgent activity at a manageable minimum (as in the case of the Manipuri IIGs); and compel the militant leadership to disarm and join the peace process (such as in the case of the Nagas). In this regard, India has attempted to qualitatively upgrade its working relationship with the Myanmar military in recent times. The

last decade saw several rare high-level visits between the security and defence establishments of both countries, including two long visits by the Myanmar military's Commander-in-Chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, in 2017 and 2019. India too has sent its army chief (October 2020), navy chief (February 2020, July 2018, November 2016), and National Security Advisor (NSA) (June 2015 and July 2018) on high-stakes visits to Myanmar. For New Delhi, these visits indicated that Myanmar was willing to collaborate with India on both the military-to-military and security fronts, instead of just looking northwards to China.

India has also expanded its presence and cooperation with Myanmar in the kinetic space along the border. In the 2015-20 period, the armies of both countries conducted a series of counter-insurgency campaigns along the India-Myanmar border in the form of hot pursuit attacks, targeted strikes and area denial operations on at least four occasions—June 2015 (hot pursuit strike),³⁸ February-March 2019 (Operation Sunrise-1),³⁹ May-June 2019 (Operation Sunrise-II),⁴⁰ and October 2020 (Operation Sunrise-III).⁴¹ These border campaigns—modelled on Operation Golden Bird (1995), the first such endeavour by India along this border—entailed both unilateral strikes, joint operations and intelligence sharing. Operation Sunrise, specifically, was a *quid pro quo* undertaking between both countries wherein India moved against the Arakan Army rebels along the Mizoram-Chin state border in return for the Burmese Army raiding the camps of the NSCN-Khaplang (NSCN-K) and other IIGs in the Sagaing region.⁴² These operations, however, did not indicate any concrete long-term trend about bilateral security cooperation and only demonstrated a mutual willingness to occasionally collaborate on specific strategic objectives. As journalist Mrinal Talukdar more noted, they were more about sending a message to China about greater India-Myanmar cooperation than achieving any lasting tactical objective.⁴³ Notably, in May 2020 and December 2021, Myanmar handed over two batches of IIG militants to India on the latter's request.⁴⁴ All of these show that India has the space to exercise its leverage as a regional heavyweight to secure specific concessions from the Myanmar military establishment.

India's rising stature as an arms exporter to Myanmar is another important dimension of the relationship. According to the SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, India has delivered four military systems to Myanmar in the 2010-20 period, including 20 Sheyna Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) torpedoes in 2019-20 as part of a US\$ 38 million deal and a retrofitted Kilo-class diesel electric submarine in 2020. Other reports suggest that India had controversially transferred a Remote Controlled Weapon System (RCWS) to the Myanmar military after the February 2021 coup.⁴⁵ Further, India has conducted several joint military exercises with the Myanmar military within both bilateral and multilateral formats—such as IMBEX/IMBAX (UN peacekeeping training), Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) table-top air force exercises, and BIMSTEC multilateral and multi-agency exercises.⁴⁶ In July 2019, both countries inked a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on defence cooperation, codifying some of the aforementioned aspects of the relationship.⁴⁷

Naval cooperation has been a key element of the military-to-military relationship, with the Indian Navy ramping up hardware, maintenance and training support to its Burmese counterpart over the last decade as well as conducting Coordinated Patrols (CORPATs) since 2013 to “to address issues of terrorism, illegal fishing, drug trafficking, human trafficking, poaching and other illegal activities inimical to the interest of both nations.”⁴⁸ India's investments in the Myanmar Navy come from its desire to offset the Chinese presence in the Bay of Bengal and retain its operational space in the eastern Indian Ocean. A pro-China navy in Myanmar would invariably erect a strategic fence for India on its eastern seaboard and hinder future deployments.

Despite the growing cooperation, India should not outsource all its security needs on the border to the Myanmar military. History is testament to the fact that the Burmese military leadership can be unreliable and unpredictable. As an entity looking to constantly balance two big regional powers for its narrow political-strategic interests, while also protecting its own fragile reputation at home, it may not always act in India's interests. As Ambassador Mukhopadhyaya puts it compellingly, “India will now

have to question how far a Tatmadaw that is at war with its own people, plays ducks and drakes with IIGs at the India-Myanmar border or has little control over them, and is prone to Chinese blandishments, can be relied upon for its security.⁴⁹ Early signs, in this regard, are bleak.

Recent reports suggest that the military has been hiring members of some Manipuri IIGs as mercenaries against anti-junta militias inside Burma.⁵⁰ In exchange, the IIGs, which were struggling to maintain their bases in Myanmar, are now being allowed to reestablish their camps on Burmese soil. The November 2021 deadly ambush on an Assam Rifles convoy by militants from two IIGs (who reportedly crossed over from Myanmar) in Manipur's Churachandpur district was a wake-up call in this regard. That the Indian Foreign Secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, raised this issue with the junta during his visit to Myanmar in December 2021 shows that New Delhi remains concerned about the Burmese military's commitment, or lack thereof, to Indian security interests.⁵¹ Until the coup, the Myanmar military had committed sparse resources to the border region, despite Indian logistical and training support.⁵² Even after the coup, its deployments in the Chin state and Sagaing region have targeted civilian militias and Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), not IIGs. Moreover, the Myanmar military has consistently failed to check narcotics smuggling across the border—a highly-profitable activity that not just affects the social fabric of India's NER, but also funds many of the IIGs.⁵³

Therefore, New Delhi needs to seriously review its security cooperation blueprint with the military leadership next door in terms of the costs and returns on investments. India might want to diversify its relationships with other security actors in the border regions who are more willing to, and capable of, protecting India's border interests.⁵⁴ This is particularly true in the post-coup context where entities like the Chin National Army (CNA) and other civilian militias—known as the People's Defence Forces (PDFs)—are emerging as critical strategic actors in the border areas. The recent operation by the CNA against a Manipur People's Liberation Army (PLA) camp in the Sagaing region shows that these secondary actors might be more useful to India than the junta.⁵⁵

Multi-Dimensional Development Cooperation

For India, 'development' in Myanmar covers a range of aspects: economic, political, institutional and post-crisis reconstruction. This is primarily driven by India's desire to remain a key stakeholder in the country and secure its own regional interests. Thus, for India, 'development' is both an internal and external objective in Myanmar. India supports developmental initiatives in Myanmar through a mix of budgetary grants, loans, and Lines of Credit (LoCs) extended via the Export Import (EXIM) Bank. Between Financial Year (FY) 2008-09 to FY 2021-22, India allocated a total grant amount of INR 3,738.21 crore and spent a total of INR 2345.82 crore in Myanmar.⁵⁶ So far, India has allocated US\$ 476 million in LoCs to Myanmar, covering at least 11 completed projects as of March 2022.⁵⁷ The fact that budgetary allocations and actual spendings haven't dropped significantly over the last decade is a healthy indication of the growing Indian interest in aiding socio-economic progress next door as a horizontal developmental partner.

At the centre of India's development agenda in Myanmar lies *connectivity*. A majority of the Indian projects in the last three decades have been designed to boost overland west-to-east linkages using India's NER and Myanmar's northwestern border regions as the nodal points. The LEP and the border trade agreement of 1994 provided the policy thrusts for the building of road links to Myanmar for the movement of people and goods. Two projects emerged as India's flagship endeavours in this regard: the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit and Transport Project (KMMTTP) and the Trans-Asian Highway, later repackaged as the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway. In fact, the KMMTTP, which aims to connect India's NER to Myanmar through a semi-circular route from Kolkata to Sittwe (Rakhine state) and northward into Mizoram, is so crucial for India that New Delhi opened a consulate in Sittwe in 2014.⁵⁸ But, as former Indian Ambassador to Myanmar, Rajiv Bhatia, points out, "The Indian government has received much criticism for delays in the execution" of these two initiatives.⁵⁹ Even after more than a decade of formal initiation, they remain handcuffed by a host of factors, including instability, bureaucratic delays, budgetary constraints,

and lack of coordination between both countries. Other cross-border connectivity initiatives, such as the \$60 million Rhi-Tiddim road project signed in 2011, too remain stuck in the construction phase.⁶⁰ Yet other initiatives like the rebuilding of the Ledo (also known as Stilwell) road and the Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) corridor have gone into cold storage.

Overall, progress on this front remains heavily staggered, with some projects under construction and others stuck in a loop of lapsed contracts, delays and distrust. The KMMTTP project seems to be nearing its final phases, with the Sittwe port reaching a state of operational readiness and the government recently granting a fresh construction contract for the Paletwa-Zorinpui road link.⁶¹ While the IMT is far from completion, construction work to build and upgrade 71 bridges on the Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo stretch is ongoing through India's Border Roads Organisation (BRO), while contracts for the Kalewa-Yagyi section are in place.⁶² Further, both countries inked a Land Border Crossing Agreement in 2018 and opened an Integrated Check Post (ICP) at the Tamu-Moreh (Manipur) crossing and a Land Customs Station (LCS) at the Rikhawdar-Zokhawthar (Mizoram) crossing the same year.⁶³ Before the coup, the Myanmar government showed much interest in expediting Indian projects, indicating a high level of acceptance of Indian involvement in Myanmar amongst the latter's political and defence fraternities.⁶⁴ However, the coup seriously damaged the prospects of speedy perpetuation of Indian projects, owing to the adverse security situation on the ground and the junta's lack of cooperation. For instance, six months after the coup, the junta complained about the BRO's presence in Myanmar.⁶⁵ Since the putsch, both Sagaing region and Chin state have transformed into hotbeds for anti-junta insurgency. Under such conditions, infrastructure development could be a highly risky undertaking for India, not the least because any attempt by New Delhi to take a 'business-as-usual' path in Myanmar may not be seen favourably by the non-junta blocs. Further, given that the junta will likely remain focussed on counter-insurgency, politico-administrative reassertion, and national economic reconstruction for some time, its capability to

advance Indian connectivity projects will remain shaky. Sure, it might encourage India to continue its endeavours to relay a sense of normalcy and progress, but it may not be able to dedicate resources for the same. In such a situation, India would be forced to shoulder the entire financial and logistical burden on certain initiatives—particularly those that require Myanmar's active cooperation, such as the KMMTTP and IMT highway. That would mean higher costs, if not complete suspension.

India is also focussed on developing public infrastructure in the border regions and hinterlands on the Myanmar side through three flagship formats: Border Area Development Projects (BADPs), High Impact Development Projects (HIDPs) and Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) (under the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation). These are localised, sector-specific, and community-centric initiatives, often with short timelines. The BADPs include “financing bridges, roads, schools and small health centres” in Chin state and the Naga Self-Administered Zone in the Sagaing region.⁶⁶ According to the Ministry of External Affairs' (MEA's) 2020 brief on India-Myanmar relations, around 140 such projects over four years have been completed.⁶⁷ The latest BADP grant was the third-year tranche of US\$ 5 million handed over to Myanmar in August 2020.⁶⁸ The idea behind this is not just to boost bottom-up social development in areas that are India's immediate land links to Myanmar, but also to offer alternative models of progress and upliftment in blocs that are dominated by IIGs. In essence, such programmes are meant to strengthen the Indian government's image in the eyes of communities whose goodwill remains indispensable to India. Simultaneously, India has invested in a range of other sectors in Myanmar—such as vocational training, Information Technology (IT), public health, higher learning, telecommunication, agriculture, railways, and others.⁶⁹ It also conducts human resource training through various programmes, most prominently under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC). Some scholars argue that these projects are “part of [India's] efforts to reach out to the masses on issues involving human security.”⁷⁰

India is also engaged in extending humanitarian and disaster-centric assistance to Myanmar for both emergency and long-term reconstruction

and resilience-building purposes. This includes assistance provided as part of relief and mitigation efforts during and after Cyclone Mora (2017), Cyclone Komen (2015), Cyclone Nargis (2008), the earthquake in Shan state (2010), and the influenza outbreak in Yangon (July-August 2017).⁷¹ In fact, India sent two naval ships as part of its emergency assistance after the devastating Cyclone Nargis in 2008.⁷² In that sense, India is eager to position itself as a regional first-responder to humanitarian disasters in Myanmar. Further, in 2011, India supplied ten disaster-relief silos to Myanmar under a \$2 million grant.⁷³ India also categorises relief aid provided to the Rohingya Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)—to whom it officially refers to as “displaced persons from Rakhine”—after the August 2017 violence within this cluster of emergency assistance.⁷⁴ This includes financial assistance provided to Myanmar under the Rakhine State Development Programme (RSDP), which is premised on the debatable idea that economic development will resolve the Rohingya political question.⁷⁵ In 2019, under the RSDP, India donated 250 prefabricated houses for displaced Rohingya refugees, which according to reports, remain unused due to Myanmar’s failure to repatriate those who fled to Bangladesh in 2017.⁷⁶ More recently, India supplied made-in-India vaccines, anti-viral drugs and other medical supplies to Myanmar during the COVID-19 pandemic—an initiative that drew praise from the World Health Organisation (WHO).⁷⁷ As of March 2022, New Delhi had donated 37 lakh vaccine doses to Myanmar since the beginning of the pandemic—the highest amongst all recipient countries under India’s flagship ‘Vaccine Maitri’ initiative.⁷⁸ The last tranche was handed over to the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) during the Indian foreign secretary’s visit to Myanmar in December 2021.⁷⁹

India has used its assistance programme to strengthen the cultural relationship with Myanmar, which centres around the common Buddhist and Hindu heritage. For instance, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has undertaken restoration of the Ananda Temple in Bagan under an agreement signed in 2010, which Prime Minister Modi noted in his 2017 state visit to Myanmar.⁸⁰ Back home, it restored stone inscriptions and temples of the Burmese monarchs, Mindon and Bagyidaw, in Bodh

Gaya.⁸¹ In fact, India continues to highlight its soft power tools—such as Bollywood, Buddhism and Yoga—in its public diplomacy narrative on Myanmar. The other key area of focus for India in Myanmar, particularly over the last decade, has been capacity building of its public institutions. According to one study, “the growing India-Myanmar partnership [...] is not only defined by development cooperation but also by its twin, capacity building.”⁸² This has happened through training programmes for Burmese parliamentarians, police officers, diplomats, and other officials.⁸³ For India, as the world’s largest democracy, such institutional capacity-building training may be seen under the broader remit of democracy promotion. This isn’t the Western template of foisting liberal, democratic values on seemingly ‘non-democratic’ societies, but simply strengthening and aiding institutional processes in a country that has embarked on a democratic path of its own accord.

Challenges in India-Myanmar Cooperation

Notwithstanding the qualitative and quantitative rise in India’s developmental profile in Myanmar over the last decade, the 2021 coup has come as a major barrier in the path of further progress. Myanmar’s sudden relapse into military rule after nearly a decade of opening up to the world, riding on a democratic narrative, also has a deeper message for India. As Egreteau points out, India has long believed that “development rather preludes democratisation, and not the opposite”, as opposed to the ostracist approach taken by the pro-sanctions Western countries.⁸⁴ But, the latest coup in Myanmar, yet again, shows that material development, economic growth and institutional capacity-building cannot, in themselves, induce genuine democratisation.

The same logic holds for the Rohingya question, which has less to do with development and more with politico-legal reforms. Without bottom-up constitutional changes, which only Myanmar’s internal stakeholders can initiate, durable democracy in the country will remain a pipe dream. In fact, in a state of protracted authoritarian rule under the military, India’s development assistance might end up legitimising and financially buttressing anti-democratic forces, which would only

perpetuate the political backslide and also mar India's image in the eyes of the people in Myanmar.

Another key challenge for India on the infrastructure and connectivity front is the rapidly growing strength and scope of Chinese investments in Myanmar. While Beijing had begun building north-south multi-modal linkages from its southeastern Yunnan province to the southern coast of Myanmar since the early 1990s, gaining early mover advantage, it has doubled down in the last decade with the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2018, China and Myanmar inked a 15-point Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a high-profile BRI project that aims to connect China's southeast to Kyaukphyu in Myanmar's southern coast through major urban centres such as Mandalay and Yangon.⁸⁵ While India's focus in Myanmar is not on large-scale projects, parallel investments by Beijing could saturate the space for development and render Indian projects redundant in the eyes of Naypyitaw. Chinese investments in Rakhine, particularly, could outpace India's involvement there, especially because of Beijing's higher delivery capacity, faster timelines, and non-emphasis on norms of democratic accountability. Thus, New Delhi needs to calibrate and place its investments in a manner that targets areas in which the Chinese are not involved. Continued focus on BADPs and QIPs is a good idea in that regard, as they help generate growth and resilience in local communities that are untouched by high-profile Chinese projects. Further, India still has a better public image in Myanmar as compared to China, which has faced renewed criticism for its BRI projects and support for the new junta. The deposed civilian government too was highly circumspect of embracing the BRI on Beijing's terms due to the fears of debt traps.⁸⁶ On the contrary, the junta has been more eager to facilitate Chinese projects.⁸⁷ India should continue to leverage its general goodwill in Myanmar to carve out a niche away from the Chinese shadow.

Trade and Commerce

India remains much interested in opening new trading and commercial links with Myanmar with the broader aim of finding new markets in

the Mekong Basin countries and the rest of ASEAN. In that sense, Burma is a “bridge between India and Southeast Asian markets.”⁸⁸ The emphasis on west-east connectivity projects also stems from this. However, bilateral trade between both countries remains heavily stunted due to a host of factors, including broken supply chains, lack of seamless connectivity, and security challenges.

As noted in a 2019 Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) report, “India-Myanmar bilateral trade has grown from US\$ 994.45 million in 2007-08 to US\$ 1.6 billion in 2017-18, an approximate increase of 61 per cent.”⁸⁹ However, official figures show that the total volume of bilateral trade has only declined over the last decade—from around US\$ 2 billion in 2014-15 to US\$ 1.5 billion in 2019-20.⁹⁰ In FY 2017-18, the total trade volume went into a free fall, declining by more than 26 per cent from the previous year. Border trade—undertaken within the Border Trade Agreement 1995, Duty Free Trade Preference (DFTP) and ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITGA) policy frameworks through the Moreh-Tamu and Zokhawthar-Rhi notified crossings—saw a brief spike in the later half of the decade, reaching a total volume of US\$201 million in 2018-19 from a meagre US\$ 42.6 million in 2013-14, but fell back sharply to US\$ 92.65 million in 2019-20.⁹¹ Even during the decadal peak, Indian imports through the border far exceeded its exports, with FY 2018-19 clocking a negative trade balance of US\$ 154 million.⁹² This is despite the fact that India exports 22 types of items to Myanmar, and imports only 13.⁹³ Major Indian exports include pharmaceuticals, chemicals and allied products, and nuclear hardware, while imports include vegetables, wood and other edible products.

India's foreign investments in Myanmar too have tumbled rapidly over the last decade, with Naypyitaw having approved a paltry US\$ 1.2 million of investments in FY 2020-21—lower than Brunei, Marshall Islands, Malaysia and Vietnam.⁹⁴ This is an astronomical decline from the decadal peak of US\$ 224 million approved in 2015-16.⁹⁵ According to World Bank data, India wasn't even in the top five of Myanmar's global trade partners as of 2019.⁹⁶ As of November 2020, it was the eleventh

largest investor in Myanmar.⁹⁷ Before the coup, the Adani Group, which was building a river terminal in Yangon as part of a US\$ 290 million controversial deal with the Myanmar military-owned Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), was one of the largest private investors in Myanmar.⁹⁸ The company scrapped the project following massive outrage after the putsch, showing the precarity of doing business in a military-ruled Myanmar.⁹⁹ The Indian pharma company, Zydus, has a presence in the Thilawa Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Further, two Indian Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs)—ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) and Gas Authority of India Limited (GAIL)—have major interests in Myanmar’s hydrocarbon sector. OVL has exploration rights in two blocks of the Shwe gas project off the Rakhine coast—in which it had invested \$722 million till 2020, with the Indian government confirming another \$121 million in 2020.¹⁰⁰ GAIL, on the other hand, had picked up stakes in the Myanmar-China pipeline in 2010, which is a rare instance of cooperation between Indian and Chinese interests in Myanmar.¹⁰¹ In 2018, a Joint Working Group on oil and gas was set up, and two years later, India announced an ambitious plan to build a US\$ 6 billion oil refinery through the Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL).¹⁰²

Both countries concede that “the current level of bilateral trade is not reflective of the actual potential and expressed commitment in strengthening [the] economic partnership”, as articulated during the last meeting of the Joint Trade Committee in November 2020.¹⁰³ There is also a recognition at the official level of the lack of diversification in the trade profile and proper border connectivity infrastructure.¹⁰⁴ There was a belief that the Moreh ICP would significantly improve the situation. However, recent trends are bleak. According to the Land Ports Authority of India, no goods were moved across the ICP in 2020–21, as opposed to 252 in 2019–20.¹⁰⁵ This was largely owing to movement restrictions and border sealing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But, even before the pandemic, border trade volumes were dismal, with India accounting for just 1.1 per cent of Myanmar’s border trading partners in 2017–18.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, it is an open secret that the volume of cross-border ‘informal trade’, which is a “euphemism for smuggling or illegal trade”, is “estimated to be far,

far bigger than legal border trade.”¹⁰⁷ Notably, India and Myanmar had decided to set up ‘border haats’ in 2012, following which they created a ‘Border Haats Committee’ and even identified ten locations.¹⁰⁸ However, the plan is yet to be operationalised. More than 90 per cent of the total bilateral trade is undertaken through sea, and the land routes account for less than 1 per cent—proving how poorly developed the overland linkages between both countries remain.¹⁰⁹ The slump isn’t just in the domain of trade. Indian companies have failed to tap into the Burmese market despite a steady expansion of the middle class and the parallel inflow of more expensive products “imported from far-off economies”.¹¹⁰

Amongst the many challenges that India faces today in its trade and commercial outreach to Myanmar are: lack of diversified and seamless multi-modal connectivity for optimised transportation; trade deflection or entry of cheaper third party goods through the NER border into India (such as Chinese and Thai); adverse institutional structures; and trade barriers. As noted by ICRIER, the conversion of barter cross-border trade to normal trade in the last decade has had a restraining impact on the ease of trading due to increase in documentation and custom duties on imports.¹¹¹ Further, the prevalence of Non-Tariff Measures (NTMs) “often become obstacles to trade as they may raise the costs for the exporter or may be difficult to comply with.”¹¹² Both India and Myanmar remain disconnected from the Regional Value Chains (RVCs) that have otherwise benefited other Southeast Asian economies.¹¹³ In 2017, India set up the India-Myanmar Chamber of Commerce (IMCC) with the stated objective of increasing the bilateral trade to US\$5 billion. However, the 2021 coup has only further muddled the trade and commerce environment, in terms of not just the overall ease of doing business, but also India’s public image in Myanmar. Large sections of the democratic opposition, including the National Unity Government (NUG), continue to view foreign business chambers operating under the junta-ruled Myanmar negatively.¹¹⁴ The fact that the IMCC has refused to call out the junta’s stringent cyber security laws, unlike Western business chambers, has also come under public scrutiny.¹¹⁵ The rapid destabilisation of the border areas after the coup—including the crucial

border trading town of Tamu, which has emerged as a hotspot for armed resistance—has choked future prospects for development of overland connectivity. This is bound to have a severe restraining effect on India's trade-and-commerce outreach to Myanmar.

The Coup and Beyond

The February 2021 coup was a tectonic moment in Myanmar's modern history—not because the country hasn't seen a coup before, but because it came after what seemed like the advent of a whole new era of democracy and freedom. While there were tell-tale signs of a fraying civil-military relationship even as Myanmar transitioned into a negotiated parliamentary system through the last decade, no one was really quite convinced that the generals would abruptly pull the plug on the democratic experiment. The military justified the takeover by claiming that the general election held in November 2020, which several independent observers declared as free and fair, was rife with fraud.¹¹⁶ For the people of Myanmar who had come to appreciate, and even benefit from, the opening up of the country's political and economic spaces, the coup marked a frustrating relapse into the comatose state that they were locked in for decades.

The fact that a countrywide 'Civil Disobedience Movement' (CDM) emerged right after the takeover, closely followed by the mushrooming of civilian militias known as People's Defence Forces (PDFs), makes it clear that military rule is no longer acceptable to the majority of the people in Myanmar.

The resistance has also taken on an institutional character, with the deposed civilian lawmakers coming together to establish the National Unity Government (NUG) as the legitimate representative of the people of Myanmar. The NUG is derived from another core body of lawmakers created four days after the coup—the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). A third body—the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC)—was created to serve “as a consultative platform for the CRPH, political parties, EAOs, representatives of the CDM, and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).”¹¹⁷ According to

observers, the NUG commands “strong popular support” in Myanmar, especially amongst the majority Bamar population, and a “limited number of the country’s EAOs.”¹¹⁸ The primary focus of the NUG, a more ethnically diverse entity compared to the Bamar-dominated NLD, has been to create a federal democracy, which is different from the democracy-heavy agenda of the deposed Suu Kyi-led government. Besides, unlike the EAOs that have traditionally sought “political autonomy within a federalised state structure”, the newly-emerged PDFs have a more radical goal of “completely replacing the current military.”¹¹⁹ In that sense, what Myanmar is witnessing today is a bottom-up revolution aimed at bringing about a complete transformation of the country’s political system. At the core of this is the collective desire to abolish the military-drafted 2008 Constitution and, in the process, bring the military under full civilian control in order to prevent future coups.

For India, these new realities are crucial, for they reveal new openings to build a prosperous and meaningful bilateral relationship for the future. They also indicate that India could falter if it relies on its old diplomatic playbook, which predicates bilateral engagement on good relations with the military.

In keeping with its foreign policy legacy of ‘tightrope diplomacy’ and engaging-not-censuring, India has refused to follow the Western track of harshly condemning the junta and imposing sanctions, while also calling for early restoration of democracy.¹²⁰ This is a faithful deference to the thinking that developed in New Delhi in the early 1990s. As explained by Indian Foreign Minister, Dr S Jaishankar, during a press conference after a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) Foreign Ministers Meeting in Canberra in February 2022, the primary reason why India has refrained from imposing sanctions on Myanmar is because of its “specific concerns” about insurgency, COVID-19 vaccination, and humanitarian situation along the border.¹²¹ India believes that in order to address these concerns, it has to work with whoever is in power in Naypyitaw. India has also persistently supported the ASEAN’s ‘Five-Point Consensus’ and Special Envoy process on Myanmar, hoping that these would result in some acceptable solution to the crisis.¹²²

Amongst the Indian foreign policy commentariat, there's much support for talking to the junta. In fact, prominent Indian scholars have argued that India needs to directly engage with the coup regime, which calls itself the 'State Administration Council (SAC)'.¹²³ In December 2021, India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla, became one of the first high-level foreign dignitaries to visit Myanmar and meet the junta leadership after the coup. Most Indian commentators lauded the visit, dubbing it as reflective of India's "sober approach" and the belief that "India does not have the luxury of isolating Myanmar in the way the Western world has done".¹²⁴ While the Indian foreign secretary did not say anything that amounts to explicitly recognising the coup regime during his visit and only raised India's security concerns over the border, one could argue that the mere visit of a senior Indian official to Naypyitaw to meet the military chief and the Indian side's use of the term 'State Administration Council' for the junta could be seen by many as an act of legitimising the coup.¹²⁵

There is no doubt that India's security concerns over the volatile border are legitimate. It is precisely because of these interests that successive Indian governments have refused to alienate the Myanmar military, which it believes is well placed to secure the border and keep the IIGs at bay. But, this view remains dubious, especially in the context of the emerging ground realities. Although India has developed an intimate relationship with the Myanmar military and helped it modernise, the latter's commitment to Indian concerns remains as shaky as ever. Several media reports indicate that since the coup, the junta has been using members of IIGs as mercenaries against civilian militias in the Sagaing region and Chin state.¹²⁶ In return, it is, once again, allowing the IIGs that had lost their bases over the last decade, to reestablish camps on Burmese soil.¹²⁷

Further, the military appears to be losing territorial control over the border regions because of the expanding anti-junta insurgency. At a more fundamental level, it is the military's decision to launch a coup that sparked the fresh cycle of violence across the country and completely damaged whatever stability India had managed to establish along the NER border areas. Thus, if New Delhi wants security and stability next

door to advance its own political, economic and strategic interests, it should, first and foremost, acknowledge that the military is no longer a force for stability in Myanmar.¹²⁸ Rather, it is the civilian political ecosystem—NUG, CRPH, NUCC and civil society—that enjoys most of the popular legitimacy and, thus, is best placed to provide a stable environment for its developmental and commercial investments.

The other emergent reality that India must pay heed to is the growing role of Myanmar's younger generation of political activists and civil society actors who have grown up with the internet, have a cosmopolitan worldview, and are fiercely protective of democratic values. The advent of social media and cheap internet, in particular, have changed the way Myanmar looks at the world, including its neighbours. Today, there is growing civil society scrutiny on countries that have refused to condemn the coup, such as India.

New Delhi must not underplay this critical socio-psychological shift on the ground in Myanmar, as it has the potential to severely damage its image as a friendly neighbour. This is even more so because popular sentiments, including strong articulations on social media, can shape mainstream political perceptions.

Myanmar's core political fraternity seems to be troubled by the Indian neutrality on the coup. This might affect India's diplomatic prospects in the near future when a civilian government returns to power in Naypyitaw. In an earlier interview with the *Deccan Herald*, the NUG foreign minister said, without mincing words, that "looking ahead in time, friendship and the ties between [India and Myanmar] will not be the same as the people of Myanmar will not forget where the Government of India stood in their trying times."¹³⁰

India also has anxieties about China's involvement in Myanmar. Before the coup, Chinese investments in Myanmar had expanded dramatically under the BRI's ambit. But, that juggernaut has now slowed down significantly, not least because of the adverse security situation on the ground. Since the coup, China's public image in Myanmar has rapidly spiralled due to its firm refusal to condemn the junta. Subsequently, Chinese factories and other critical assets have come under attack by

demonstrators and PDFs.¹³¹ If anything, this has a serious lesson for India—any country, regardless of how politically powerful it is, can't operate freely in Myanmar if it is even *seen to be taking* the junta's side. Much like India, the Chinese seek stability in Myanmar so that they can take the BRI forward, and an unpredictable, unpopular, and destabilising junta holding on to power by coercion doesn't really help them. Because of the emergence of new militias that are not under Beijing's sphere of influence (unlike several of the northern EAOs), China "no longer enjoys the kind of leverage over Myanmar's politico-security landscape that it did before the coup."¹³² It is no surprise, therefore, that China has reached out to the political opposition, including the NUG, and continues to maintain links with the NLD.¹³³ This should be indication enough for India that talking to the pro-democracy forces in Myanmar and earning their trust is the only way to maintain a healthy and people-centric presence in the country while also gaining an edge over China.

In today's context, that will also mean dialling up the pressure on the junta to immediately restore civilian rule, engage with all pro-democracy stakeholders, and initiate genuine political reforms. Besides, India has already emphasised on a regional solution for the crisis, while opposing West-led resolutions against the junta at the UN.¹³⁴ However, New Delhi needs to walk the talk and engage with ASEAN and other like-minded regional partners with similar interests, such as Japan and Bangladesh, in pressuring the junta. Putting all its eggs in one basket (read: ASEAN) is only a nominal solution and won't lead to any collective regional engagement or genuine people-centric outcomes for Myanmar. China already has an edge on political influence inside Myanmar, especially with the north-based EAOs. However, its general public image in the country is in tatters. This is not the case with India, which, as an influential Asian democracy, still commands respect amongst the people in Myanmar. India needs to capitalise on that soon, for it won't last for long if India is seen to be continuously soft-peddalling the coup or its relationship with the military.

In short, India needs to keep its ears to the ground in the prevailing situation in Myanmar, which remains highly fluid and volatile. At the

same time, it needs to break free from its diplomatic ennui and take some leaps of faith in order to achieve two objectives at once—fortify its image amongst the people of Myanmar; and secure its position as a responsible regional power. Both these goals are crucial for Indian aspirations in this century. Ultimately, for India, Myanmar remains an indispensable link to the east, and without a foreign policy that respects the sentiments of the Myanmar people (and not a bunch of uniformed officers driven by an insatiable hunger for power), this link will remain permanently broken and unsustainable.

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