

Myanmar- the bridge linking India with Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

After the end of Cold war in 1991, Southeast Asia emerged as a natural option as India began searching for new relationship. Although the size of the economy and level of development in the Asian region are quite diverse, it does not matter to deeper regional integration to Asian economies. As Asia becomes the engine for growth for the global economy, the India and ASEAN must capitalize on their partnership through enhanced connectivity to reap the benefits most. In this backdrop, Myanmar the only land bridge between India and ASEAN has the potential to provide an impetus to India-ASEAN relations in shaping future economic, political and security environment in this region. The present paper is an attempt to analyse how Myanmar acts the only land bridge between India and ASEAN and how it enhances their future relationship.

Key Words: ASEAN, Cold War, Connectivity, Geopolitical reality, Sine qua non

I. INTRODUCTION

What Myanmar means to India? K.M. Panikkar, renowned strategist and diplomat, remarked 'To defend Burma is to defend India'. What is in Myanmar for India? Examples of what Myanmar has to offer to India would be: Border security, Energy- 3.2 billion barrels of recoverable crude oil and an estimated gas reserve of 2.5 trillion cubic meters, Market- arms and normal goods, Land route to South-East Asia, Cross-Border Trade, Economic progress of North-East Region and to counter Chinese influence.

Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) is an Asian country located at the junction of East, South and Southeast Asia. This country lies between the countries of the Indian sub-continent and the major economically developed nations of Southeast Asia. Myanmar is the largest country in the mainland Southeast Asia bordering Bangladesh and India in the west and northwest, China in the north and northeast, Laos PDR and Thailand in the east and southeast. Similarly, the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal bound Myanmar in the south and southwest.

India and Bangladesh have a land and maritime border connectivity with this ASEAN country in fact Myanmar is the second largest neighbour and first largest on India's eastern side. Both India and Myanmar share a land border of 1,643 kilometers, which is almost unfenced (only 10 Kms are fenced) Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram shares boundary with Myanmar's Kachin, Sagaing and Chin states. India also shares the strategic waters of Bay of Bengal and Andaman and

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Nicobar islands where the two countries are barely thirty kilometers apart. Infact Myanmar ports give India the shortest approach route to many of India's northeastern states. Mani Shankar Aiyar, the former Union Minister for Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER), often comments that Southeast Asia begins from Northeast India, and South Asia begins in Myanmar.

During the British colonial rule, Myanmar, had been an integrated part of the British Empire, was a province of India. Due to this, there were well established cultural links, flourishing of commercial ties, and involvement of Indian community in the socio-economic development of Myanmar. After India got independence and Burma had become an independent country as well, these factors later on contributed towards a close Indo-Burmese relation but also development of common interests as far as the regional and world affairs were concerned. India and Myanmar are signatory to the Treaty of Friendship enacted in 1951 and the friendly relations that they share have become closer by the exchange of high level visits by the top leadership of both the countries. As far as India is concerned, the visit of the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1987 which laid the foundations for a stronger relationship between India and Myanmar has been followed by subsequent visits of our Prime Minister, viz., Manmohan Singh and recently by the present Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

II.MYANMAR AS A GATEWAY TO ASEAN

Myanmar is second golden gateway (after Northeast) to ASEAN for India as it is the only country of this group which has a land and maritime boundary with India. Before the initiation of India's Look East Policy in 1991, the focus of India was on the bilateral relations with Myanmar however after India's announcement of Look East Policy, Myanmar occupies an important place in it. As Myanmar is India's gateway to Southeast Asia and is essentially required to realize India's Look East Policy because of the fact that the country is located to the south of the states in Northeast India, viz., Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh etc. India after 1991 looks Myanmar as an indispensable medium for acquiring more economic benefits as well as to put India in a strategically more advantageous position through its Northeast. India is well aware of the fact that befriending Myanmar offers scope to transform its landlocked Northeast to a land-linked one. Myanmar is crucial to India's economic engagements with the Southeast Asian countries, India is not in a position to ignore the geopolitical reality of the Myanmar as the only land bridge to Southeast Asia and as a strategic 'buffer state' between India and China, and these points make Myanmar important for India in its Look East Policy or rechristened as Act East Policy.

In Post-Look East Policy period, Myanmar played its part in order to integrate India with the ASEAN process. Although India has become the full dialogue partner of ASEAN (1992) before the inclusion of Myanmar as a full-fledged member into ASEAN (1997) but Myanmar along with Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Singapore extend its unequivocal support to India's demand of Summit level, which was finally conceded by ASEAN Summit in November 2001. Myanmar has also played its part by joining the

sub-regional groups along with India like BIMSTEC, MGC, promoted by India in order to counter the growing influence of China in the Southeast Asia region.

The ASEAN-India vision document 2020 and India-ASEAN car rally was a notable initiative undertaken by the Indian government to emphasize on the geographic proximity between Northeast India and Southeast Asia. Moreover, India has undertaken some bilateral and multilateral projects for boosting connectivity between the Northeast and Southeast Asia. The important ongoing and potential infrastructure projects in this regard are Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa Road, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Trans Asian Highway, India-Myanmar rail linkages, Kaladan Multimodal project, the Stilwell road, Myanmar-India-Bangladesh gas or oil pipeline, Tamanthi Hydro-electricity project and optical fiber network between Northeast India and Southeast Asia. But certain obstacles like lack of infrastructural development, absence of enthusiastic response from local people, frequent insurgencies, poor governance in the states, the easy availability of arms and weapons from across the international border to be utilized in armed movements and criminal activities impede increased relations between Northeast India and South East Asia.

III. INDIA'S ECONOMIC RELATIONS WITH MYANMAR (TRADE AND INVESTMENT)

In the sphere of economic relations, Myanmar is crucial for India as far as economic relations is considered. Myanmar has become an imperative as India embarked on its Look East Policy. In 1991, the Narasimha Rao government launched of Look East Policy, aimed at getting closer to the booming economies of South East Asia. As Myanmar is the only Southeast Asian country which shares its land border with India, so, it could acts the right linkage between India with the rest of Southeast Asian economies and conceptually with ASEAN. As far as trade between India and Myanmar is concerned, the trade with Myanmar and trade through Myanmar with other ASEAN countries would not only revive the Northeast states of India but also make both regions (South Asia and Southeast Asia) prosperous.

Both India and Myanmar choose to close the gap when both the countries signed the MoU on trade and economic cooperation, particularly in terms of border trade in 1994. Similarly in April 1995, the Moreh-Tamu border trade was opened. In 2004, another border trade post Zowakhatar (Champai) in Mizoram state adjoining Rhi in Myanmar was inaugurated. Recently an agreement was reached on setting up of a third border trade point at Avakhung-Pansat/Somra in Myanmar and onward to Leshi. In 2007, government of India approved the setting up of Border Trade Centers (BTC) in the state of Nagaland along with Indo-Myanmar border. In recent trade meetings between India and Myanmar it was decided that these present border trade points (Moreh-Tamu and Zowakhatar-Rhi) were transformed into normal trade points. All these steps were taken for the expansion in the list of legally traded items. Major exports into Myanmar- Cotton yarn, auto-parts, soya bean meal and pharmaceuticals. Major Imports from

Myanmar- Betel nut, dried ginger, green mung beans, turmeric roots, resin and medicine herbs. India's trade with Myanmar has increased substantially from US\$ 411.11 million in 2002-2003 to US\$ 653.17 in 2018-2019 (Apr-Sep). The trend in India's trade with Myanmar is given below:

India's Trade with Myanmar

Value in US \$ million

Year	Export	Import	Total Trade	Balance of Trade
2002-03	75.07	336.04	411.11	-260.97
2003-04	89.69	409.01	498.7	-319.32
2004-05	113.19	405.91	519.1	-292.72
2005-06	110.70	525.96	636.66	-110.7
2006-07	140.44	782.65	923.09	-642.21
2007-08	185.82	808.63	994.45	-622.81
2008-09	221.64	928.97	1150.61	-707.27
2009-10	207.97	1289.80	1497.77	-1081.83
2010-11	320.62	1017.67	1338.29	-697.05
2011-12	545.38	1381.15	1926.53	-835.77
2012-13	544.66	1412.69	1957.35	-868.03
2013-14	787.01	1395.67	2182.68	-608.66
2014-15	773.24	1231.54	2004.78	-458.3
2015-16	1070.65	984.27	2054.92	86.38
2016-17	1067.25	1067.25	2175.14	40.64
2017-18	639.64	639.64	1605.83	326.55
2018-19	521.49	521.49	1727.09	684.11
2019-2020 (Apr-Sep)	216.51	216.51	653.17	220.15

Source: Ministry of Commerce, Government of India

At present India is Myanmar's fifth largest trading partner, fifth largest export destination for Myanmar and sixth largest source of imports into Myanmar. For the expansion of trade between India and Myanmar, both countries has signed the India-ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement in 2009. Myanmar is also the beneficiary of duty free scheme of India for Least Developed Countries (LDC). Which intends to provide tariff preferences by India on products originating in the notified Least Developed Countries.

In the investment sector India at present (as per year 2018) is the eleventh largest investor in Myanmar, almost twenty six Indian companies such as Essar, GAIL, and ONGC Videsh Ltd invested in Myanmar's oil and gas sector totaling US\$763.6 million so far, according to DICA. On 5th -7th September 2017, the

current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi visited Myanmar. The visit proved very useful in reviewing the relations between two countries. Modi visited Myanmar at a time when she was transforming from military rule of almost six decades to democratisation. The National League for Democracy (NLD) was came to power in March 2016. During the visit Modi and his Myanmar counterpart signed eleven MoUs, these include, MoU on maritime security; cultural exchange of white shipping information; regulation of medical products; MoU in the field of elections; cooperation between Press of both countries; coastal surveillance system; establishment of Myanmar Institute of Information Technology (MIIT); and cooperation in the field of health and medicine.

IV. INFRASTRUCTURE AND CONNECTIVITY PROJECTS

For India, its relationship with Myanmar is integral to its Act East policy, in the pursuit of a more stable, secure and prosperous Asia and the surrounding Indian Ocean and Pacific regions. Connectivity, therefore, between India and Myanmar is essential to India. Given the geographical proximity of Myanmar with India, the establishment of road, rail, inland waterway and maritime links is vital for integrating the region as well as to encourage and develop economic interactions that would contribute to the region's socio-economic improvement. Myanmar is also crucial for New Delhi's connectivity initiatives in the region, particularly in the light of its non-participation in the Beijing led Belt and Road Initiative. Both India and Myanmar recognize the importance of building up required infrastructure as a means of promoting commercial, cultural, touristic and other exchanges. In this backdrop improving connectivity between India and Myanmar has been one of the focal point in their relations.

India is well aware of the fact that connectivity with Myanmar can accelerate the development process in India's landlocked Northeast Region and also helps in smoothing relations with other ASEAN countries, thus it is interested to invest in various infrastructure projects (road, rail and maritime) with Myanmar. It has offered \$35 million as financial assistance to Myanmar for various projects. There are also plans to connect it with pre-existing highways all the way to Da Nang in Vietnam. The various major development projects between India and Myanmar in the area of road, rail and waterways are:

PHYSICAL CONNECTIVITY PROJECTS BETWEEN INDIA AND MYANMAR

Project	Stretch	Current Status/Remarks
The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Facility	The sea, river land transport system linking Indian ports and Sittwe Port in Myanmar and by road to Mizoram (India). Implementation commenced in Dec 2010	Operational only by 2019-2020
The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project	The 1360 km cross-border transportation network would link Moreh (India) to Mae Sot (Thailand) through Bagan (Myanmar)	Expected to be completed by 2020
The Tamu-Kalewa-Friendship	The 160 km cross-border road from Tamu to Kalemyo in Myanmar's Sagaing Region and	Completed in 2001 (India has taken additional task for upgradation)

Road	forms part to the India-Myanmar Thailand Trilateral Highway	
The Delhi-Hanoi Railway Link	The Delhi-Hanoi train connectivity proposes to link India with Vietnam via Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore	Proposed
The Stilwell Road (the Ledo Road and the Burma Road)	The WW II overland road linking Ledo in Assam (India) to Kunming in Yunnan (China) through Myanmar	The section from Myitkyina to India-Myanmar border needs upgradation. Reopening of the road remains an issue of debate in India and Myanmar
The Rhi-Tiddim Road in Myanmar	The 80 km cross-border road from Rhi to Tiddim in Myanmar's Chin State	Started in December 2012 and is under construction
The BCIM Economic Corridor	The cross-border transportation network linking China's Kunming to India's Kolkata from Myanmar and Bangladesh	Prospective
The Mekong India Economic Corridor	The corridor proposes to connect Ho Chi Minh (Vietnam) with Dawei (Myanmar) via Bangkok (Thailand) and Phnom Penh (Cambodia) and further linking it to Chennai (India)	Proposed

Source: Presentation by K. Yhome at the International Consultative Workshop on 'Proximity to Connectivity: India-Myanmar in Perspective' held at Observer Research Foundation, Kolkata on 16-17 February 2015.

v.MAJOR PROJECTS BETWEEN INDIA AND MYANMAR

INDIA-MYANMAR FRIENDSHIP ROAD



Myanmar.

In February 2001, when then India's External Minister Jaswant Singh visited Myanmar, he opened the 160 Km Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road. This road links the Northeastern India border town of Moreh in Manipur state with Kalewa, Kalembo and Tamu in Myanmar. Tamu is from the Indian border point Moreh (Manipur, India). This road is completely built by India and was given as a gift to

The Government of India and Asian Development Bank (ADB), has signed US\$ 125.2 million loan for the development of roads in India's Northeast. This friendship road has now become the part of India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral highway.

INDIA-MYANMAR-THAILAND TRILATERAL HIGHWAY



The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMTTH) is a highway that connects India's Moreh to Thailand's Mae Sot via Myanmar. This highway is under construction and is expected to be completed by 2020, since sixty-nine bridges are yet to be constructed. After completion it is expected that this road will boost the trade and commerce in the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area, with the rest of Southeast Asia. India has proposed extending this highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The length of this highway is about 1360 kms. The essential objective of the road was to fulfil the ambition of creating a 'link' between Northeast India and Southeast Asia. India

is undertaking construction of two sections of the trilateral highway in Myanmar that involves building 120.74 km Kalewa-Yagyi road section and constructing 69 bridges along with the approach road on the 149.70 km Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa road section. India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral Highway is India's top priority projects with Southeast Asian countries.

In railways, India is helping Myanmar to enlarge its needs in railway infrastructure. Both countries are also engaged in completing missing links in the Trans Asian Railway (TAR) in different parts of their countries. India has given a line of credit of US\$ 56 million to Myanmar to build modern railway utility along the northwestern and central side of its neighbors. The Yangon-Mandalay railway sector of Myanmar is also received assistance from India. The mega railway project between India and Myanmar is New Delhi –Hanoi railway link. The main purpose behind this mega project is- firstly to link India's Manipur with India's main railway corridor and secondly to re-establish and renovate railway networks in Myanmar.

KALADAN MULTIMODAL TRANSIT TRANSPORT PROJECT (KMTT)



Transit Transport project was actually signed by India and Myanmar on 2nd April 2008, but the construction on it was started in 2010. It is a multimodal transport project having three different dimensions involving inland water, shipping and road transport. Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport projects is aimed to utilize Kaladan River and land transport for better connectivity and for

shipment of cargo from the eastern ports of India to Myanmar through Sittwe port as well as to northeastern part of India via Myanmar.

The project seeks to connect Indian mainland with its landlocked Northeastern region through all the three modes of transport like sea, river, and road. This project aims to connect seaport of Kolkata (India) with Sittwe seaport in Myanmar by sea, it will then link Sittwe seaport to Lashio in Myanmar via Kaladan river boat route and then Lashio to Mizoram in India by road transport. Major upgradation of Sittwe port infrastructure is also involved in this project, the Sittwe port is located from Mizoram border about 250 kms on the north-western coast of Myanmar where Kaladan River meets the Bay of Bengal. The main purpose of the development of Sittwe port by the Indian government is to support the cargo flow from Kolkata to northeastern state of Aizwal.

This project is still in construction but has been on fast track since India's Look East Policy rechristened into Act East Policy from 2014, when current Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi came into power for his first term. Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport project is India's largest single development task on a foreign land. Once this project is completed, it will provide an alternative route to India to ship its goods to its landlocked northeastern region, besides it, northeastern region of India will get access to sea through Myanmar, this will eventually boost India's economic ties with the ASEAN countries. Lastly, this project also contributes to development in Myanmar and eventually its economic integration with India. The table given below provides details of this route.

Stretch	Mode	Distance
Kolkata to Sittwe port in Myanmar	Shipping	539 Kms
Sittwe to Paletwa (Kaladan River)	Inland Water Transport (IWT)	158 Kms
Paletwa to Indo- Myanmar border (Myanmar)	Road	110 Kms
Border to NH.54 (Lawangtlai- a district of Mizoram (India)	Road	100 Kms

Source: <http://mdoner.gov.in/infrastructure/kaladan-multimodal-transit-transport-project-inland/>.

VI. ENERGY COOPERATION BETWEEN INDIA AND MYANMAR

At a time when energy security is a paramount concern for all developing nations, New Delhi is working with Yangon toward a hydropower development program that will ensure the supply of power to India while simultaneously developing hydropower resources in neighboring countries. Myanmar's abundance resources of energy and its close proximity to India creates immense possibility of energy cooperation between two countries both in hydropower and hydrocarbon sector. According to the figures from the Energy and Information Administration of USA, Myanmar has abundant amount of crude oil reserves approximately 150 million barrels, and its natural gas reserves are around 10-13 trillion feet. So, Myanmar is an attractive target for India's energy diplomacy. In 2005, the three countries India, Bangladesh and Myanmar signed an agreement of establishing 290 Kms of gas pipeline that would run through Myanmar via Mizoram and Tripura (Indian states) and to cross over to Bangladesh before entering back to Indian state of West Bengal. This agreement did not come into execution because of the reluctance of Bangladesh. Due to Bangladesh's reluctance Myanmar allotted the gas blocks to China, saying that India was delaying the commitment.

In future if this India-Myanmar-Bangladesh gas pipeline project would execute, it would definitely help India in any future transportation of oil and gas from Myanmar.

VII. DEFENSE COOPERATION BETWEEN INDIA AND MYANMAR

The India-Myanmar border is highly porous, poorly guarded, underdeveloped, insurgency prone region and most dangerously its proximity to the world's largest five opium producing area made the security of India's northeastern region more vulnerable. The 1643 kms long border of India and Myanmar is a hub of ethnic insurgency that poses internal security challenges to India. The northeast region have represented "a policy headache for New Delhi".

It is also a known fact that many of the insurgent groups like Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland, National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB), People's Liberation Army (PLA) Revolutionary People's Front (RPF), United Nation Liberation Front (UNLF), United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA)

and Manipur People's Liberation Front (MPLF), People's Revolution Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) and Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) of Meghalaya, which are active in India's northeast region and fight against Indian state have their bases in Myanmar's division of Sagiang and also had links with other insurgent groups of Myanmar such as Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and United Wa State Army (UWSA) and others.

Myanmar said that it is not possible for them to crack down on all the insurgent groups due to the remoteness of the area and lack of their military facility, so on 21 May 2010, Indian army handed over heavy machinery and other necessary spare parts to their Myanmar's counterparts at Moreh. On 8th May 2014, both the countries signed a MoU on Border Cooperation. Under this agreement a framework for an extended collaboration on security issues, information and intelligence exchange and jointly coordinated border patrols are provided. In order to combat insurgency, India-Myanmar Bilateral Military exercise (IMBAX-2017) was held on 20 November 2017. This exercise was conducted at the newly established Joint Training Node in Umroi, Meghalaya. The second and latest one was IMBEX 2018-19 was held on 14-19 January 2019 at Chandimandir Military Station.

Myanmar and India share long maritime boundary in the strategically significant Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal, so maritime cooperation has become an important aspect of security relations. In July 2018, during the Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) meeting India's then External Affairs Minister Shushma Swaraj announced that India would assist modernization of Myanmar Armed Forces as also in creating a national army, cooperation in the field of IT, in dealing with emerging security challenges and military to military cooperation. She has also expressed commitment on having better coordination and cooperation between their security forces to deal with the insurgents groups, particularly those from northeast region.

VIII. CHINESE ANGLE IN INDIA-MYANMAR RELATIONS

When we talk about Indo-Myanmar relationship, China certainly becomes the point of discussion. Myanmar is a bridge connecting South Asia, South East Asia and East Asia. It has two rising powers as neighbours, China to the North east sharing 2171 kilometres long border while India to the northwest sharing 1643 kilometres long border. Its long coastline with good harbours also makes it an important player in the Bay of Bengal. This strategic location makes it an important neighbour for both the countries.

As far as China-Myanmar relationship is concerned, they never had a cordial relationship but experienced ups and down, for instance, China's invasion of Myanmar, their relationship after independence. Again after 1988 because of the isolation of Myanmar there is a closer relationship in China-Myanmar, and we also see how China defended Myanmar in United Nation and other International arena etc.

China in the 21st century has been consistently raising its profile in Southeast Asia, including Myanmar. It has provided substantial economic, military, and political support to Myanmar. China is a major supplier

of military hardware to Myanmar. It has provided jet fighters, armored vehicles, and naval vessels valued at close to US\$2 billion, using a barter system, as Myanmar has insufficient foreign exchange resources to pay for these arms. China has also helped the Myanmar authorities to modernize their naval bases at Hanggyi, the Coco Islands, Akyab, and Mergui. The nature of such relations between China-Myanmar is making difficult for India to create good relations with Myanmar. India feels that China's strategic move to Myanmar is a security threat to India. In fact, one of the major factors that led to shift in India's policy towards Myanmar was its security concern. Myanmar provides China an easy access to the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea which is a cause of concern for India's security. Myanmar provides China the best short cut to the Indian Ocean. China's dominance in Myanmar is therefore a threat to maritime interests of India in the Indian Ocean. Thus, improvement and revival of India-Myanmar relations is extremely needed in order to counter the challenges of "rising China". India views the renewed and steady interest of Myanmar in cooperating with India as an attempt to balance Chinese influence.

VIX. CONCLUSION

The crucial factor that makes India and Myanmar relations critically important is its strategic geographical location. Myanmar is also an important key for India to reach out Southeast Asia, and thus a crucial component of its "LEP" now also called "Act East" by the current government. Myanmar is India's land bridge to ASEAN hence closer connectivity with Myanmar is *sine qua non* for the success of India's "Act East Policy". Moreover Myanmar shares the strategic waters of Bay of Bengal- the Andaman and Nicobar islands, it gives India a geographical contiguity with the Asia-Pacific region acting as a gateway for India to ASEAN.

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