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BUDDING INDO-MYANMAR RELATIONS: RISING BUT LIMITED CHALLENGES FOR CHINA

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Introduction

Myanmar, which is located at the junction of Southeast Asia and South Asia, is perceived as a crucial partner for New Delhi to promote India's economic and strategic interests in Southeast and East Asia, suppress the insurgencies and drug trafficking in the border region, and balance Chinese influences. For these reasons, India has made continuous efforts to develop bilateral ties with Myanmar since the mid-1990s. The fast-growing Indo-Myanmar relations have raised some concerns from China. In fact, these have led some Chinese scholars to conclude that India is striving to counter the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹ As a part of this, the resurgence of the India-US bilateral relationship has made Chinese scholars anxious about how these developing relationships may balance Chinese influence in Myanmar.²

Within this context, this article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Indo-Myanmar relations in the post-Cold War Period, with special reference to their impact on China. The main argument of this article is that developing Indo-Myanmar relations have a less direct impact on Sino-Myanmar relations. The first part of the paper briefly introduces the historical background of Indo-Myanmar relations. Then, it moves on to an in-depth discussion about the political engagement, maritime security cooperation and physical connectivity between the two countries as well as its meaning to China. Finally, it concludes that India has actually only had a marginal influence on Sino-Myanmar relations.

Historical background of Indo-Myanmar relations

India has had a long historical connection with its neighbour Myanmar, including close commercial, religious and cultural ties, since ancient times. After independence from British rule, the personal friendship that existed between the two Prime Ministers of the two states, Nehru and U Nu,³ during which they signed a Treaty of Friendship in 1951 and collaborated as leaders in the Non-Aligned Movement, strengthened relations.

However, the cordial relationship suffered a serious setback when General Ne Win seized power in a military coup in March 1962. This followed India's discontent with Myanmar's neutral stance on the Sino-Indian border dispute and Ne Win's nationalization movement. The damaged relationship, however, began to recover after the late 1960s partly as a counter to the more intense Sino-Myanmar relationship. It saw slight improvements during the 1970s and 1980s with high level official visits. These included trips to Myanmar by the prime ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi in 1969 and 1987 respectively, and Ne Win's India tour in 1980.

Yet, this development in Indo-Myanmar relations was stymied in 1988 following the Indian government's overt criticism of the new Burmese junta in Yangon,⁴ and India's public support to Burmese democrats who were cruelly suppressed by the junta. However, in the early 1990s, in order to bring about a thaw in relations also to serve the interests of economic cooperation, allow joint counter-insurgency operations in the border, and balance the fast-growing Chinese influences in Myanmar, New Delhi switched to a new Myanmar policy aimed at engaging with the military regime.⁵ Myanmar also took reciprocal measures to restore the bilateral ties, such as joint military actions targeting Indian rebels in the Myanmar-India border region 1995, so as to win Indian support for the military regime.

The election of Narendra Modi as prime minister of India in May 2014, following the inauguration of Myanmar's new government in 2011, has added further momentum to Indo-Myanmar relations. For New Delhi, Myanmar lies at the intersection of two of Modi's policy directives, which include the 'Act East Policy' and the 'Neighbourhood First Policy'.⁶ Hence, India has strengthened cooperation with Myanmar in strategically important areas such as physical connectivity and maritime security cooperation. The landslide victory of the National League for

Democracy (NLD) in Myanmar's landmark election in November 2015 opened a new era for bilateral relations, in which India has been able to further advance its economic and strategic interests in Myanmar.

Indo-Myanmar political engagement: what it means to China

Through reciprocal high-level diplomatic trips, cooperation, and dialogue, Indian policy-makers argue they can establish bilateral connections and exert some credible leverage over Myanmar's polity and society.⁷ Sandwiched between China and India, Myanmar is committed to maintaining a delicate balance between the two giants in order to reduce its vulnerability. With this in mind, India and Myanmar have worked to enhance their cooperation since the inauguration of the quasi-civilian government in Myanmar in March 2011, with a view to strengthening their bilateral ties and hedging against rising Chinese influence in the region. Soon after a trip to China in May 2011, President Thein Sein led a high-level delegation including a number of cabinet ministers to New Delhi in October 2011, which was a landmark event that sought to transform Indo-Myanmar relations.⁸ The visit should be seen as a measure to counterbalance the comprehensive strategic partnership between Myanmar and China, which was announced during Thein Sein's China tour in May 2011. Following this, the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh undertook a three-day visit to Myanmar in May 2012, the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister for two decades.⁹ This visit resulted in 12 agreements on economic and technical assistance, trade and investment, border development, physical connectivity, and academic and cultural exchanges. In November 2012, Aung San Suu Kyi returned to India after a gap of nearly four decades, as part of India's ongoing engagement with the democrats in Myanmar.¹⁰

Since Narendra Modi came to office in May 2014, India has strengthened its cooperation with Myanmar in all areas, with a particular focus on physical connectivity. India's intention was to upgrade the bilateral relationship to a strategic one which would allow it to advance its strategic plan in the region. In November 2014, Modi paid his first visit to Myanmar, during which both sides agreed further to enhance commercial and cultural ties by promoting cooperation in the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway project (IMT), the Kaladan project, the bus service between Imphal and Mandalay, the possibility of India investing in Myanmar's special economic zones, oil and gas exploitation, India's agricultural assistance to Myanmar, and the Buddhist connection.¹¹ In

September 2017 Modi travelled to Myanmar again and reached 11 agreements on infrastructure and maritime security cooperation with Myanmar. In a recent five-day Myanmar trip conducted by Indian President Ram Nath Kovind in December 2018, two agreements on trade and training programmes were finalized. India also expressed strong support for Myanmar regarding the peace process in northern Myanmar as well as the Rohingya issue, donated 50 portable houses to a Rohingya refugee camp and promised to expand development aid to Rakhine State, intending to reinforce Indo-Myanmar relations by increasing involvement in the Rohingya refugee crisis. In return, Myanmar's President Htin Kyaw visited India in August 2018, four months after his first China tour. During this visit, both sides agreed to deepen cooperation in the areas of agriculture, trade, energy, health, physical connectivity, and border management. In the following October, Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counsellor and Foreign Minister of Myanmar, came to India on a state visit, during which two agreements were signed. One was on energy cooperation and the other on an Indian-led training programme for Burmese banking and insurance staff.

The fast-developing relationship between India and Myanmar has attracted growing attention from China, where Chinese commentators are becoming concerned that India is trying to compete with China through fostering close relations with Myanmar.¹² Their concerns have been expressed in a number of broad areas. First, India has become a major foreign partner for Myanmar and has played an important role in Myanmar's great power balancing act. Second, India has advanced its economic and strategic interests in Myanmar and has gained a foothold in Southeast Asia, which could balance China's efforts to expand influence in South Asia via Myanmar. Third, there are currently no big troubles in Indo-Myanmar relations while there are a number sensitive bilateral issues damaging Sino-Myanmar relations.

Nevertheless, Chinese scholars have generally come to the view that India has failed to challenge China's predominant position in Myanmar. India has never been perceived as a peer competitor of China by Myanmar's elites because of its growing but relatively weak national strength as well as influence in the region. Economically, Indian traders and entrepreneurs are not as active as Chinese businessman in the Myanmar market. For instance, China is the leading trade partner and one of the top three main sources of foreign investment for Myanmar, while India is far behind.¹³ In addition, India, due to its limited government budget, could not provide as much development assistance as China. As a

result, Myanmar has had to be dependent more on Chinese economic resources rather than India. Politically, India is not a permanent member of United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and thus is not in a position to provide equally strong support for Myanmar. Indeed, Myanmar has revived its cordial relationship with China since the NLD came to power largely due to China's support for and assistance to Myanmar over the Rohingya refugee crisis. India, however, was under pressure to take the lead in imposing pressure upon Myanmar for the repatriation of Rohingyas who fled to the states bordering Myanmar.¹⁴ Besides this, China is already the leading focus of Myanmar's diplomacy, while India has never managed to become the top priority of Myanmar's foreign relations. Therefore, Myanmar is unlikely to allow or support India to undermine Chinese interests in its territory, though it has realized the value of India in its great power diplomacy.

It is a curious fact that resistance from within Myanmar itself presents another barrier for India's further engagement with Myanmar. This resistance can be traced back to the time of the British Raj. Many in Myanmar take the view that the region was exploited during this period not only by Britain, but also by and with the co-operation of India. The local Burmese were compelled to live under the rule of Indian officials, administrators and police as part of the British Empire.¹⁵ As a result, there has been a persistent feeling of resentment since this time on the part of Myanmar towards India. After independence, the Burmese government (as it then was) initiated a number of measures to strengthen the economic interests of the Burmese against the foreigners. These measures had a significant impact on the Indians, who formed the largest proportion of the foreign population in independent Burma, and thus there also developed a deep resentment amongst Indians in both Myanmar and India.¹⁶ Since the Burmese military seized power, the political use of xenophobia and nationalism has evolved into an effective tool for successive military regimes in defining external threats to the country's sense of national sovereignty and security.¹⁷ Given its traumatic colonial legacies as well as its strong nationalist stance, Myanmar has never been enthusiastic about wholly embracing India's eastward projection – only to the extent that it suits Myanmar's immediate interests.¹⁸ Additionally, both the pro-democracy forces inside and outside Myanmar and the local communities have harboured strong resentment towards Indians. In November 2012, Aung San Suu Kyi paid her first visit to India in almost 40 years, during which she spoke of a growing perception that Indians no longer valued democracy.¹⁹ Later, before the 2015 elections, in an interview with Indian media she said: "It saddened me that India, the largest

democracy in the world, was turning its back on democracy in order to maintain good relations with the military government.”²⁰ Indian investment projects, particularly resource programmes, also faced serious resistance from ordinary citizens within Myanmar. For instance, the 1,200-MW Htamanthi Dam, financed by India, was scrapped in 2013 after protests by thousands of displaced villagers in north Myanmar. Similar protests also led to the cancellation of another major dam project, the 642-MW Shwezaye hydroelectric plant. The prohibitive cost of constructing the projects was also a major factor in the withdrawal of the two projects, as well as increasing political pressure from indigenous environmental groups.²¹

Indo-Myanmar naval cooperation: hindering China’s Indian Ocean strategy?

India has also deepened naval co-operation with Myanmar with a view to becoming the principal defence partner of Myanmar. Since 2011, frequent visits by senior naval officers from both countries have taken place, in order to strengthen co-operation in the fields of naval operations, training, and use of naval materiel. [Table 1](#) shows the high-level visits between the two naval forces of India and Myanmar from 2001 to 2018.

Both sides have established a number of mechanisms, such as the annual dialogue between the two navies, which are intended to institutionalize defence co-operation between the two countries. India and Myanmar have increased the number of military exercises in order to further strengthen naval co-operation in various fields including joint operation, training, and logistics support. For instance, Myanmar’s warships participated in the ‘Milan’ exercise in February 2012 and conducted a naval exercise with the Indian Navy in the Bay of Bengal in March 2013. Since then, the Myanmar fleet has regularly joined in the multi-lateral military drill led by the Indian Navy. The Indian Navy likewise has made friendly visits to the ports in Myanmar.

The Indian Navy has also sold naval weapons and offered various training programmes to the Myanmar navy. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Transfer Database, Myanmar has purchased a total of US\$ 69 million-worth of equipment from India between 2000 and 2018, including five BN-2 Maritime MP aircraft (second-hand) in 2007, three HMS-X ASW sonar in 2013, and US\$ 31 million-worth of Shyena ASW torpedos in 2017.²² Besides,

Table 1 High level visits between the two navies of Indian and Myanmar (2001–2018)

Year	High-level visits
January 2001	Admiral Sushil Kumar, Chief of Navy Staff of the India Navy, visited Myanmar
November 2001	Vice Admiral Kyi Min visited India
September 2003	Admiral Madhavendra Singh, Chief of Navy Staff of the India Navy, visited Myanmar
February 2005	Admiral Soe Thein, Chief of Navy Staff of the Myanmar Navy, visited India
April 2005	Vice Admiral RP Suthan, Chief of Navy Staff of the Eastern Naval Command of India, visited Myanmar
December 2005	Vice Admiral Sanjeev Bhasin, Commander of the Eastern Fleet of India, visited Myanmar
January 2006	Admiral Arun Prakash, Chief of Navy Staff of the India Navy, visited Myanmar
May 2007	Admiral Sureesh Mehta, Chief of Navy Staff of the India Navy, visited Myanmar
July 2007	Vice Admiral KS Jamwal, Chief of Navy Staff of the Eastern Naval Command of India, visited Myanmar
August 2009	Vice Admiral PK Goal, Chief of Navy Staff of the Eastern Naval Command of India, visited Myanmar
August 2011	Admiral DK Joshi, Chief of Navy Staff of the India Navy, visited Myanmar
July 2013	Admiral Thet Shwe, Chief of Navy Staff of the Myanmar Navy, visited India
January 2016	Vice Admiral HCS Bisht, Commander of Coast Guard of India, visited Myanmar
September 2017	Admiral Htin Aung San, Command of the Myanmar navy, visited India

Source: Annual Reports of the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2001–2018.

the Myanmar navy has also pursued Indian help for developing its ship-building industry, intending to reduce its heavy reliance on foreign military hardware. During Vice Admiral Thet Swe's India trip in July 2013, he sought Indian assistance in building offshore patrol vessels and also a supply of naval sensors as well as other military equipment to upgrade its weak navy.²³ A similar request was made during Min Aung Mlaing's India tour in July 2015, during which he expressed an interest India's offshore patrol vessels after visiting the Indian Goa Shipyard Limited.

The prospect of increasing naval co-operation between India at first sight threatens to hamper China's ambitions in the Indian Ocean. Since the end of the Cold War, China has sought to gain strategic access to the Indian Ocean via Myanmar, and this consideration is a key plank of its Myanmar policy. Thus, Beijing has exported a great amount of naval weaponry, conducted frequent military exchanges, and provided various training and aid programmes to the Myanmar navy in the past three decades. Indeed, New Delhi has accused China of using this collaboration to conduct intelligence operations, particularly where it has offered technical assistance at Myanmar's military bases, especially in the small islands

such as Coco Island by the Bay of Bengal.²⁴ In order to dispel India's serious concerns about the military cooperation between the two navies of Myanmar and China, Myanmar invited Indian naval officers to visit the suspect military facilities to assure India that military activities in Myanmar territory's were not targeting third countries, and indeed would even enhance maritime cooperation with the Indian navy. India's strong stance towards Myanmar's naval collaboration with China has somewhat hampered China's room for manoeuvre in this field, giving India the capacity to monitor China's naval collaboration closely, and also giving Myanmar the continuing opportunity to diversify its military dependency away from China and act as a balance of influence within Myanmar's Navy.

However, the restrictive effects of India's influence on maritime co-operation between China and Myanmar should not be over-estimated. In fact, many military experts have expressed skepticism about India's capability to bring Indian Ocean countries into its sphere of influence and exclude other great powers from the region. As Mohan observes, the absence of an effective institutional framework for security diplomacy, the inadequate defence-industrial base, and the inability of the Indian government and its private sector to undertake and operate critical dual-use infrastructure like ports have limited India's record on the ground.²⁵ In practice, there is a far smaller number and range of naval weapons exported from India to Myanmar than China during the period of 2000–2018. For instance, Myanmar purchased a total of US\$ 1.5 billion-worth of materiel from China between 2000 and 2018, nearly 22 times that of India in the same period.²⁶ Additionally, most of the advanced weapons purchased from India, such as the BN-2 Maritime MP aircraft, are second-hand, with little real capacity to assist Myanmar in strengthening its weak navy. Due largely to its “say much but do little” approach, India is unlikely to become a reliable defence partner for the Myanmar navy. In short, whilst Chinese strategic outreach to the Indian Ocean via Myanmar has been adversely affected by the growing naval cooperation between India and Myanmar, such impacts are within a squarely within a certain range.

Physical connectivity between India and Myanmar: challenges for China

Given the geographical proximity between Myanmar and India, the development of physical infrastructure with Myanmar, including road,

rail, inland waterways and maritime routes, is crucial for integrating northeast India into the various current regional economic cooperation schemes and expanding India's influence in its broad northeastern frontier. As Pranab Mukherjee, the former Indian Foreign Minister noted:

we are involved in a variety of cross-border development projects with Myanmar in diverse fields such as roads, railways, telecommunications, information technology, science and technology, power ... These initiatives are aimed at improving connectivity between Northeastern India and Western Myanmar and are expected to give an impetus to the local economies as well as bilateral trade.²⁷

To achieve such goals, a series of transnational projects have been conducted under a range of MOUs. The first and foremost is the India-Myanmar Friendship Road, a 160-km route linking Tamu, a boundary trade port in Manipur, to Kalemio and Kalewa in the Sagaing region in Myanmar. Despite the completion of the whole project in late 2009, the road has been beset with problems. Nearly 70 weak bridges along the road have been identified as requiring repairs or upgrades by the Myanmar government.²⁸ Contracts for the work were awarded in September 2017, but at the time of writing it has not yet been completed.²⁹ The India, Myanmar and Thailand governments also initiated the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT) in 2005, which is an attempt to promote road connectivity between the three countries and thus to expand trade, tourism, and people-to-people contact.³⁰ The 1360-km cross-border highway which runs from Moreh in India to Maw Sot in Thailand through Bagan in Myanmar is intended to be fully operational by 2021.³¹ India is currently upgrading the Kalewa-Yargi road section of the project under grant assistance to Myanmar.³² Before the trial run of the IMT, a proposed Motor Vehicle agreement was proposed in early April 2015, which would allow seamless movement of passengers and cargo between the three countries,³³ but it has been delayed because the Myanmar government is apparently not keen on taking it forward.³⁴ In addition, as a supplement to the IMT, India also proposed a New Delhi-Hanoi Rail Network which would connect New Delhi to Hanoi via Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia. Although the feasibility study of this huge project was conducted by India as long ago as 2006, the final completion of the project has not yet occurred on account of a number of difficulties across the length of the proposed network.³⁵

Another significant scheme worth noting is the US\$ 110-million Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project which would connect Mizoram to the port facilities in Sittwe through Chin and Rakhine State in Western Myanmar. On the grounds that Bangladesh has been reluctant to allow

transit facilities, the project will offer an alternative transit route to India.³⁶ In addition, Mizoram, the land-locked state in Northeast India, would obtain a crucial access to the Indian Ocean thereby increasing its trade and commercial links with other states in India as well as Myanmar. Since the Framework Agreement was signed in April 2008, the Indian government has already completed the project including the construction of a river port at Sittwe, an Inland Water Transport (IWT) Terminal at Sittwe, as well as the IWT terminal at Paletwa in Chin State (a project which required the dredging of a navigational channel on the Kaladan River).³⁷ Nonetheless, a 130 km two-lane highway from Paletwa to the border crossing at Myeik Wa and Lomasu, and a 100 km two-lane highway in Mizoram State from Lomasu to Lawngtlai, not to mention a Land Customs Station at Zorinpui in Mizoram, still remain to be finished. The completion of the road project still poses considerable challenges due to local political unrest in Chin State as well as land acquisition hurdles in Mizoram.

Many Chinese commentators tend to take a negative view of India's efforts to promote physical connectivity with Myanmar and other states along the Mekong River. Due largely to India's rejection of BRI, they believe that India is attempting to compete with China through its transnational projects inside and outside Myanmar, and thus to act as a balance against Chinese economic influence. They are also concerned about the strategic consequences of the transport projects along the India-Myanmar border, which might hinder China from establishing its superiority in the Indian Ocean via Myanmar. Yet, China's concerns over these strategic projects have been considerably dampened for a number of reasons. First of all, there is a great gap between the Indian government's commitments, and what it has been able to implement. This is the major obstacle in developing physical connectivity between India and Myanmar. Indeed, there is a widespread feeling in Myanmar that the "Indian government promises much but delivers little".³⁸ Almost all the flagship projects, chiefly the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, have not been completed by the expected dates, despite Modi's vows to implement the projects with strong Indian support.

What is more, India's goal of expanding its influence from the Western peripheral region to the rest of Myanmar is seriously restrained due to a reluctance on the part of the Myanmar government to facilitate this objective.³⁹ In addition, military attacks from the armed Rakhine and Indian rebels in the border region, as well as problems of illicit trade, drugs smuggling and migration, have all destabilized the region,

making it difficult to develop infrastructure and promote connectivity.⁴⁰ Thanks to these negative factors, New Delhi has difficulty in advancing its economic and strategic interests in Myanmar through implementing these large-scale projects. As a result, it does not seriously threaten the primacy of the BRI or China's developing power in the Indian Ocean region.

Conclusion

By conducting high-level visits, promoting naval cooperation, and constructing trilateral infrastructure projects, India has made some progress in its push eastwards. The growing Indo-Myanmar relationship, their physical connectivity and naval cooperation in particular, has caught the attention of Chinese commentators in this field. Most of them have concluded that India is attempting to counter the BRI and hinder China's efforts itself to pushing westward in the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, they are sufficiently optimistic that India will not be able to achieve its goals. Firstly, despite the regular diplomatic visits, Myanmar's generals and democrats have never truly trusted New Delhi. Likewise, there is local resentment towards India and well as long-standing suspicions about the long-term strategic goals of New Delhi in all levels in Myanmar. Secondly, various trilateral transportation programmes aimed at building more connectivity between the poor regions in North-east India and Western Myanmar have suffered long delays, therefore undermining India's national reputation and strategic goals in Myanmar. Thirdly, India has faced considerable difficulties in developing its own defence industry to a level that can allow it to assist with Myanmar's security needs and to enable it to become a reliable defence partner for Myanmar. Given these factors, the developing relationship between India and Myanmar constitutes an abiding challenge to China, especially in the field of security area, but it is still remains a relatively low-level challenge.

NOTES

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