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Evolving India-Myanmar Relations: Underlying objectives and values

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Introduction:

India and Myanmar share a long and complex history, characterized by cultural-historical ties, trade, commerce, and geopolitical interests. The two countries are linked by a 1,643-kilometer border and a shared history that has seen the spread of Buddhism and Hinduism from India to Myanmar. Prior to the 1960s, India had a close and friendly relationship with Myanmar, which was fostered by political and economic cooperation as well as personal friendship between leaders U Nu and Jawaharlal Nehru. While there were occasional diplomatic tensions during the 1960s and 1970s, bilateral relations remained positive. Myanmar's independence was followed by a short democracy that was overthrown in a military coup led by General Ne Win in 1962. This takeover marked the end of democracy in Myanmar. Despite this, India continued to maintain a good relationship with Myanmar from 1962 to 1988, even though Myanmar's military leadership implemented a policy of political and economic isolation¹. India initially criticised Myanmar for its human rights violations and lack of democracy, providing shelter to pro-democracy activists and calling for Myanmar's return to democratic rule. This earned India the respect and hope of the Burmese people. India also advocated for the international isolation of Myanmar. However, in the early 1990s, India changed its stance towards Myanmar due to China's influence, India's economic and strategic interests, security concerns in its Northeast region, Myanmar's increasing international legitimacy, and India's ambitions in Southeast Asia. This change in policy, part of

¹ Sidhu, Jatswan S. "India's Myanmar Policy since 1988: Between Democratic Ideals and Geostrategic Imperatives." *Journal of International Studies*. <https://e-journal.uum.edu.my/index.php/jis/article/view/7891>

India's 'Look East' policy, was driven by a more pragmatic approach that prioritized India's national interests.

During Rajiv Gandhi's presidency was leading India, a civil society organisation called the India-Burma Friendship Society was formed. This organisation consisted of Indian scholars and politicians who were dedicated to opposing the military dictatorship in Myanmar and supporting Burmese refugees. Members of the group worked to isolate Myanmar's military junta from the international community and openly criticised the SLORC government².

In 1991, the Indian government released Soe Myint, a former Burmese student who had hijacked a Thai Airways flight to Kolkata in November 1990. Soe Myint's goal in the hijacking was to draw attention to the inhumanity of Myanmar's military junta, which had refused to accept the results of the May 1990 elections. With the help of Indian politicians and NGOs, Soe Myint and his companion were granted political refugee status in India, which angered Myanmar's military regime. To further support pro-democracy activities and criticize Myanmar's military rule, the Indian government allowed the NCGUB, an opposition group to Myanmar's military government, to open an office in New Delhi in July 1992. Despite Myanmar's objections, they were unable to pressure India to reverse this decision³.

² Azman Ayob, "India-Myanmar Relations: From Idealpolitik to Realpolitik - Researchgate," researchgate, December 2016, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329119511_India-Myanmar_Relations_From_Idealpolitik_To_Realpolitik

³ Nandita Haksar, "Man on a Mission: How Soe Myint Went from Being a Hijacker in India to a Media Tycoon in Myanmar," Scroll.in, August 28, 2018, <https://scroll.in/article/892114/man-on-a-mission-how-soe-myint-went-from-being-a-hijacker-in-india-to-a-media-tycoon-in-myanmar>

Culture

India and Myanmar share a long history of cultural and historical ties. The Burmese script is based on the Indian Grantha script, and Buddhist teachings have led to significant cultural exchange between the two countries⁴. The trade route between China and India passed through northern Myanmar, and the Pyu established city-kingdoms in Myanmar at Binnaka, Mongamo, Shri Kshetra, and Halingyi⁵. The same Chinese records emphasised the human nature of Pyu government and the elegance and grace of Pyu life. Myanmar was also a province of India, which led to cultural links, flourishing commerce, and common interests in regional affairs.

The geographic, historical, cultural, and economic ties between India and Myanmar span centuries and are essential for the overall development of the North-Eastern Indian states. The two countries established diplomatic relations after Myanmar's independence from Britain in 1948. India and Myanmar have cooperated in various fields, including trade, energy, security, and culture. India has also aided Myanmar in various sectors, such as infrastructure, education, and healthcare. The two countries have also worked together to promote regional stability and economic integration in the Bay of Bengal region.

⁴ “India – Myanmar Relations - Ministry of External Affairs,” Ministry of External Affairs - Government of India , July 2012, <https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/myanmar-july-2012.pdf>

⁵ David I. Steinberg, “Myanmar,” Encyclopædia Britannica, August 1, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Myanmar>

Both nations have a long-standing trade relationship, with India being one of Myanmar's largest trading partners⁶. The two countries have been working together to strengthen their economic ties, with India playing a significant role in Myanmar's economic development. India has been investing in Myanmar's infrastructure, energy, and agriculture sectors, and has also been providing technical assistance to Myanmar in various fields. India provided aid to Myanmar in the form of grants and loans, which have been used to fund various development projects in the country.

The economic ties between India and Myanmar present both challenges and opportunities. One of the challenges is the lack of proper infrastructure in Myanmar, which makes it difficult for Indian businesses to operate in the country. Another challenge is the lack of transparency in Myanmar's business environment, which makes it difficult for Indian businesses to navigate the country's regulatory framework. However, the economic ties between the two countries also present significant opportunities. Myanmar's strategic location makes it an important gateway for India to Southeast Asia, and India has been working to develop Myanmar's infrastructure to facilitate trade between the two countries. The two countries have also been working to increase their bilateral trade, with India offering Myanmar duty-free access to its markets for certain products.

Energy Consumption

India's investments in Myanmar's energy sector have been critical in enhancing bilateral economic cooperation and strengthening the overall relationship between the two countries. Myanmar is strategically located between India and Southeast Asia, and its vast energy resources make it an

⁶ “ASEAN-India Free Trade Area Part II: Indonesia, Vietnam & Myanmar,” ASEAN India free trade area-Indonesia Vietnam Myanmar, February 2013, <https://www.asiabriefing.com/news/2013/02/asean-india-free-trade-area-part-ii-indonesia-vietnam-myanmar/>

attractive destination for Indian investments. Energy cooperation between India and Myanmar includes projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project, and the Myanmar-India Gas Pipeline Project.

The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which aims to create a multi-modal transport link between the Indian Ocean and Northeast India via Myanmar, is a flagship infrastructure project between the two countries. The project includes the construction of a port at Sittwe in Myanmar, the development of inland waterways to connect Sittwe with the Indian state of Mizoram, and the construction of a highway to link Mizoram with the rest of India. The project is expected to boost trade, reduce transportation costs, and enhance connectivity between India and Southeast Asia.

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project is another significant infrastructure project that aims to enhance connectivity between India, Myanmar, and Thailand. The project involves the construction of a highway that will connect Moreh in India with Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar. The project is expected to improve trade and commerce, enhance regional connectivity, and promote tourism⁷.

The Myanmar-India Gas Pipeline Project, 1,400 km-long pipelines, is a significant energy cooperation project between the two countries. The pipeline runs from the port of Kyaukpyu in Myanmar to the Indian state of Mizoram and is expected to transport natural gas from Myanmar

⁷ Ayman Falak Medina, “India Eager for Expansion of Trilateral Highway to Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam,” ASEAN Business News, August 18, 2022, <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/india-eager-for-expansion-of-trilateral-highway-to-cambodia-laos-and-vietnam/>

to India. The project has the potential to enhance energy security for India and promote economic cooperation between the two countries⁸.

India has been investing heavily in Myanmar's energy sector, which is an important aspect of their overall relationship. India has been investing in the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project, and the Myanmar-India Gas Pipeline Project⁹. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project aims to connect the eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata with Sittwe port in Myanmar, while the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project is an East-West corridor connecting India's Northeast with Myanmar

⁸ “India Faces China, Thailand in Race for Myanmar Gas,” The Economic Times, accessed August 5, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/india-faces-china-thailand-in-race-for-myanmar-gas/articleshow/2014411.cms?from=mdr>

⁹ “India – Myanmar Relations - Ministry of External Affairs,” Ministry of External Affairs - Government of India , July 2012, <https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/myanmar-july-2012.pdf>

and Thailand¹⁰. The Myanmar-India Gas Pipeline Project is a 1,400 km-long pipeline that will transport natural gas from Myanmar's offshore gas fields to India¹¹.

Energy cooperation is an important aspect of the overall relationship between India and Myanmar. India is one of the largest investors in Myanmar's energy sector, and the two countries have been working together to develop their energy infrastructure. The Myanmar-India Gas Pipeline Project is a significant step in that direction as it will help meet India's growing energy needs and provide Myanmar with a new source of revenue. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project will also help to improve connectivity between the two countries and facilitate trade and investment¹².

However, there have been challenges in boosting India's investments in Myanmar's energy sector. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project has faced delays and cost overruns, which have hindered its progress. The Myanmar-India Gas Pipeline Project has also faced challenges,

¹⁰ Bikash Singh, "Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project Is Nearing Completion with Mizoram: Governor," The Economic Times, November 12, 2021,

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/infrastructure/kaladan-multi-modal-transit-transport-project-is-nearing-completion-with-mizoram-governor/articleshow/87672577.cms>

¹¹ Mahendra Lama, "Opinion: How India Lost a Gas Pipeline to China," The Kathmandu Post, July 14, 2020, <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2020/07/14/how-india-lost-a-gas-pipeline-to-china>

¹² Bikash Singh, "Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project Is Nearing Completion with Mizoram: Governor," The Economic Times, November 12, 2021,

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/infrastructure/kaladan-multi-modal-transit-transport-project-is-nearing-completion-with-mizoram-governor/articleshow/87672577.cms>

including security concerns and opposition from local communities¹³. Despite these challenges, India's investments in Myanmar's energy sector are an important aspect of their overall relationship and have the potential to bring significant benefits to both countries.

Security Cooperation

India and Myanmar share a long border, which has been vulnerable to insurgency and terrorism for many years. Both countries have recognised the need for security cooperation to combat the threat of insurgent groups and terrorists operating in the region. India has been a critical partner in Myanmar's peace process and has provided extensive support to the country's efforts to combat insurgency and terrorism.

One of the most significant challenges in India's security cooperation with Myanmar is the porous border between the two countries. Insurgents and terrorists can easily cross the border, making it difficult for both countries to maintain law and order in the region¹⁴. India and Myanmar have established several mechanisms to address this challenge, including coordinated patrolling, intelligence sharing, and capacity building.

India has played a critical role in Myanmar's peace process. India has been involved in the peace negotiations between the Myanmar government and ethnic armed groups and has provided

¹³ Rajeev Bhattacharyya, "Incomplete Kaladan Project May Delay India-Myanmar Connectivity Plans," – The Diplomat, October 28, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/incomplete-kaladan-project-may-delay-india-myanmar-connectivity-plans/>

significant support to the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signed in 2015¹⁵. India has also provided support to the peace process by facilitating dialogues between the different stakeholders and by providing humanitarian assistance to the people affected by the conflict.

However, there are also several challenges to the security cooperation between India and Myanmar. One of the significant challenges is the mistrust between the ethnic groups in the region and the Myanmar government. The mistrust has led to several insurgent groups operating across the border, making it difficult to establish peace in the region. Additionally, the cooperation between India and Myanmar has also been impacted by China's influence in the region, which has often created tensions between the two countries.

Several regional organisations have played a crucial role in maintaining peace and security between Myanmar and India. These organisations have provided numerous platforms for dialogue, cooperation, and coordination between the two countries, contributing to regional stability and prosperity. In this section, we will discuss some of the key regional organizations that have helped in maintaining peace and security between Myanmar and India.

1. ASEAN: The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played a vital role in maintaining peace and security in the region. India is a dialogue partner of ASEAN, and Myanmar is also a member of the organisation. ASEAN has been instrumental in facilitating dialogue and cooperation between India and Myanmar, particularly on issues related to security

¹⁵ Wasbir Hussain, "Myanmar in New Delhi's Naga Riddle," IPCS, October 6, 2015, http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=4920

and economic development. The organisation has also provided a platform for India to engage with other countries in the region and deepen its ties with Myanmar¹⁶.

2. BIMSTEC: The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional organisation comprising of seven countries, including India and Myanmar. The organization aims to promote cooperation in various sectors, including trade, investment, energy, and security. BIMSTEC has been instrumental in enhancing cooperation between India and Myanmar on several fronts, including infrastructure development, energy, and trade. The organization has also facilitated dialogue between the two countries on security issues, particularly those related to terrorism and transnational crimes¹⁷.
3. Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC): The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation is a regional organisation comprising six countries, including India and Myanmar. The organisation aims to enhance cooperation in various sectors, including culture, tourism, education, and transport. The MGC has been instrumental in promoting people-to-people contacts between India and Myanmar and deepening their cultural ties. The organization has also facilitated cooperation between the two countries on issues related to transport and infrastructure development¹⁸.

¹⁶ Kishore Mahbubani and Rhoda Severino, "ASEAN: The Way Forward," McKinsey & Company, May 1, 2014, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/asean-the-way-forward>

¹⁷ Radha Raghuramapatruni, "India's Trade with the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral ...," ResearchGate, August 2018, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327441188_India's_Trade_with_the_Bay_of_Bengal_Initiative_for_Multi-Sectoral_Technical_and_Economic-Cooperation_BIMSTEC_-_A_Study

¹⁸ Research and Information System for Developing Countries, "Mekong-Ganga Policy Brief - ASEAN India Centre," ASEAN India Centre, December 2020, <https://aseanindiacentre.org.in/sites/default/files/Publication/MGPB%20Special%20Issue%202020%20Final.pdf>

4. India-Myanmar Joint Consultative Commission (JCC): The India-Myanmar JCC is a bilateral mechanism that provides a platform for dialogue and cooperation between the two countries. The JCC has been instrumental in deepening India-Myanmar ties and enhancing cooperation on various fronts, including security, trade, investment, and infrastructure development. The JCC has also played a crucial role in facilitating dialogue between India and Myanmar on regional and international issues, including those related to peace and security¹⁹.

Cultural Exchange

Cultural exchange between India and Myanmar has a long and rich history, dating back to ancient times. India and Myanmar share many cultural and religious traditions, with both countries having strong links to Buddhism and Hinduism. This shared cultural heritage has provided a solid foundation for the deepening of ties between the two countries.

One of the keyways in which cultural exchange has contributed to the strengthening of bilateral ties between India and Myanmar is through the promotion of people-to-people contacts. Cultural events and festivals, such as the India-Myanmar cultural festival held in Yangon in 2019, have provided a platform for people from both countries to interact with each other, learn about each other's cultures, and form lasting friendships²⁰. These events have helped to build bridges between

¹⁹ India TV News Desk, "India, Myanmar Joint Panel Meeting on Friday- India TV News," India, Myanmar joint panel meeting on Friday, July 15, 2015, <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/india-and-myanmar-joint-panel-meeting-on-friday-52675.html>

²⁰ Arunabh Saikia, "After Six Decades, Manipur's Burmese Tamils Get a Glimpse of Their Ancestral Places in Myanmar," Scroll.in, June 10, 2019, <https://scroll.in/article/913335/after-six-decades-manipurs-burmese-tamils-get-a-glimpse-of-their-ancestral-places-in-myanmar>

the people of India and Myanmar and have contributed to the deepening of mutual understanding and respect.

Cultural exchange has also played a vital role in promoting India's soft power and enhancing its cultural influence in Myanmar. India's rich cultural heritage, including its music, dance, art, and cuisine, has captured the imagination of many people in Myanmar. India has capitalized on this interest by organizing various cultural events in Myanmar, including Indian film festivals, art exhibitions, and music concerts. These events have helped to showcase India's cultural diversity and have contributed to the growing popularity of Indian culture in Myanmar.

Cultural exchange has also helped to preserve and promote the shared cultural heritage of India and Myanmar. The two countries have many historic sites, monuments, and artifacts that are of great cultural significance. Cultural exchange programs have facilitated the exchange of experts and scholars between the two countries, enhancing cooperation in the fields of archaeology, art, and culture. This has helped to promote greater understanding and appreciation of each other's cultural heritage and has contributed to the preservation and restoration of many historic sites and monuments.

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on the promotion of tourism as a means of strengthening cultural ties between India and Myanmar. The two countries have recognized the potential of tourism to promote greater understanding and cooperation between their people, and efforts have been made to promote tourism through cultural exchange programs. The India-Myanmar Border Tourism Project, launched in 2018, aims to promote cross-border tourism by developing tourism infrastructure and promoting cultural exchange between the two countries.

The Rohingya Issue

The Rohingya refugee crisis has had a significant impact on India-Myanmar relations. The Rohingya are a Muslim minority group in Myanmar who have faced persecution and violence at the hands of the Myanmar government. Since August 2017, over 700,000 Rohingya refugees have

fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar²¹. The crisis has strained the relationship between India and Myanmar, as India has been criticized for its response to the crisis.

India's response to the Rohingya crisis has been complicated by its strategic interests in Myanmar. India has been investing in Myanmar's infrastructure, including the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the Myanmar-India Gas Pipeline Project. India has also been working to strengthen its strategic ties with Myanmar as part of its "Act East" policy²². However, India's response to the Rohingya crisis has been criticized by human rights groups, who have accused India of not doing enough to support the Rohingya refugees²³.

The Rohingya crisis poses significant challenges for the relationship between India and Myanmar. The crisis has highlighted the need for India to balance its strategic interests in Myanmar with its commitment to human rights and humanitarian concerns. It has been working to address the crisis by aiding the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and by supporting efforts to address the root causes

²¹ 1. Kunal Debnath, Souvik Chatterjee, and Afnan Bint Afzal, "The Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar," Brill, April 18, 2022, https://brill.com/view/journals/ijgr/29/5/article-p825_002.xml

²² 1. Lindsay Maizland, "What Forces Are Fueling Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis?," The Rohingya Crisis, accessed August 5, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/background/rohingya-crisis>

²³ 1. Nonika Marwaha, "India's Strong Rebuttal to UN Criticism on Rohingyas, Human Rights," India's Strong Rebuttal To UN Criticism On Rohingyas, Human Rights, September 12, 2017, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/rohingya-crisis-indias-sharp-response-after-un-bodys-criticism-on-rohingyas-1749263>

of the crisis in Myanmar²⁴. However, the crisis has also strained the relationship between India and Myanmar, as Myanmar has been critical of India's response to the crisis²⁵.

Overall, the Rohingya refugee crisis has had a significant impact on India-Myanmar relations. The crisis has highlighted the need for India to balance its strategic interests in Myanmar with its commitment to human rights and humanitarian concerns. India's response to the crisis has been complicated by its strategic interests in Myanmar, and the crisis has strained the relationship between the two countries.

Conclusion

India and Myanmar have a significant potential to further enhance their bilateral relationship in various fields. Through strengthening their economic, strategic, and cultural ties, the two countries can contribute to the stability and development of the Asian region. India can assist Myanmar in its development efforts, while Myanmar can provide India with access to the important and valuable ASEAN markets. Additionally, both countries can collaborate on regional initiatives to promote connectivity and address common challenges. It is crucial for India and Myanmar to continue to engage in constructive dialogue and take concrete steps to realize the full potential of their partnership. With a shared vision and commitment, India and Myanmar can build a strong and mutually beneficial relationship in the years to come.

²⁴ Yhome, K. "Examining India's Stance on the Rohingya Crisis." ORF, September 10, 2018. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/examining-indias-stance-on-the-rohingya-crisis/>

²⁵ Yhome, K. "Examining India's Stance on the Rohingya Crisis." ORF, September 10, 2018. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/examining-indias-stance-on-the-rohingya-crisis/>

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