



Research Paper

India–Myanmar Relations: Opportunities, Cooperation, and Challenges in the Post-Reform Period

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ABSTRACT: India and Myanmar share deep-rooted civilisational, cultural, and religious linkages that span over two millennia. Their contemporary ties gained renewed momentum with India's Look East Policy (now Act East Policy) and Myanmar's political reforms beginning in 2011. The period that followed saw heightened cooperation in trade, security, connectivity, energy, and cultural exchanges. While Myanmar's democratic reforms initially promised greater engagement with the international community, including India, persistent political instability, insurgency, illicit cross-border flows, and China's growing influence pose significant challenges. This paper evaluates the dynamics of India–Myanmar relations in the context of Myanmar's political reforms, examining cooperation in areas such as diplomacy, trade, infrastructure, security, and people-to-people linkages. It also identifies key challenges, including political instability post-2021 coup, security threats, and geostrategic competition. The study argues that a pragmatic, balanced approach—supporting democratic transitions but maintaining engagement with ruling authorities—is indispensable for India to secure its strategic and economic interests while deepening regional cooperation.

KEYWORDS: India–Myanmar relations, Act East Policy, connectivity, political reforms, bilateral trade, China factor.

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I. Introduction

India and Myanmar share a unique and long-standing relationship that is shaped by history, religion, geography, and economics. The two nations share a 1,600-Kilometre -long border spanning Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram, as well as a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2012). Myanmar serves as India's land bridge to Southeast Asia, making it critical to New Delhi's *Act East Policy*, aimed at stronger ties with ASEAN and broader Asia-Pacific integration.

The political reforms in Myanmar initiated by President Thein Sein in 2011 opened a new era in bilateral ties. These reforms, which included democratic elections, release of political prisoners, and ceasefire agreements with ethnic groups, led to Myanmar's reintegration into the global community (Fuller & Geitner, 2012). For India, this created new opportunities to strengthen cooperation in political, economic, and security domains. Yet, the military coup of February 2021 marked a setback, highlighting the fragility of Myanmar's transition.

This paper analyses the implications of Myanmar's political reforms for India–Myanmar relations and explores contemporary cooperation across multiple domains, while outlining persistent challenges in this strategic partnership.

II. Political and Diplomatic Engagement

High-level diplomatic engagement remains central to India–Myanmar ties. Since 2011, several landmark visits have strengthened confidence and cooperation. Indian Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh (2012) and Narendra Modi (2014) visited Myanmar, while Myanmar's leaders, including President Thein Sein and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, have paid reciprocal visits to India (MEA, 2011; MEA, 2020).

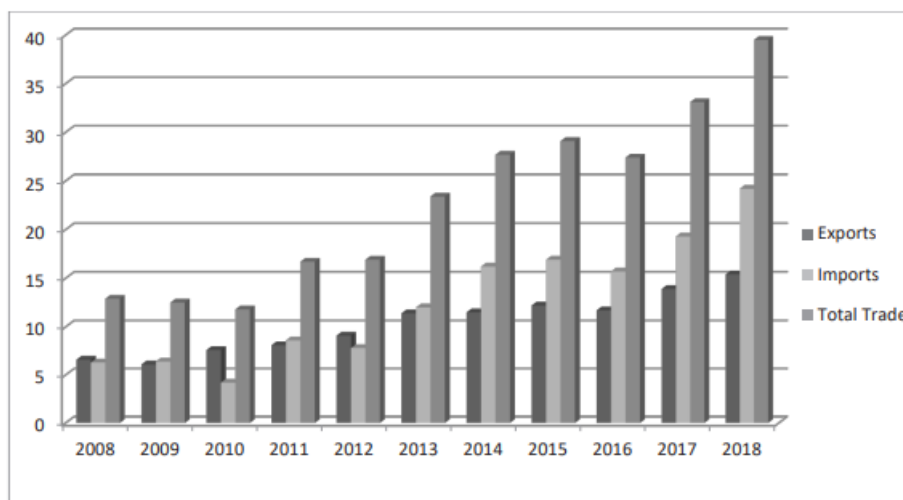
Following political reforms in Myanmar, India welcomed its engagement with ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (Salmer & Neog, 2017). Bilateral frameworks like the India–Myanmar Joint

Consultative Commission further institutionalised diplomatic dialogues. However, India's realist shift—prioritising national security and connectivity over ideological commitment to democracy (Dixit, 2000)—remains evident in its cautious approach after the 2021 coup. Despite international condemnation, India has maintained relations with Myanmar's military while reiterating support for peace and stability.

III. Economic and Trade Cooperation

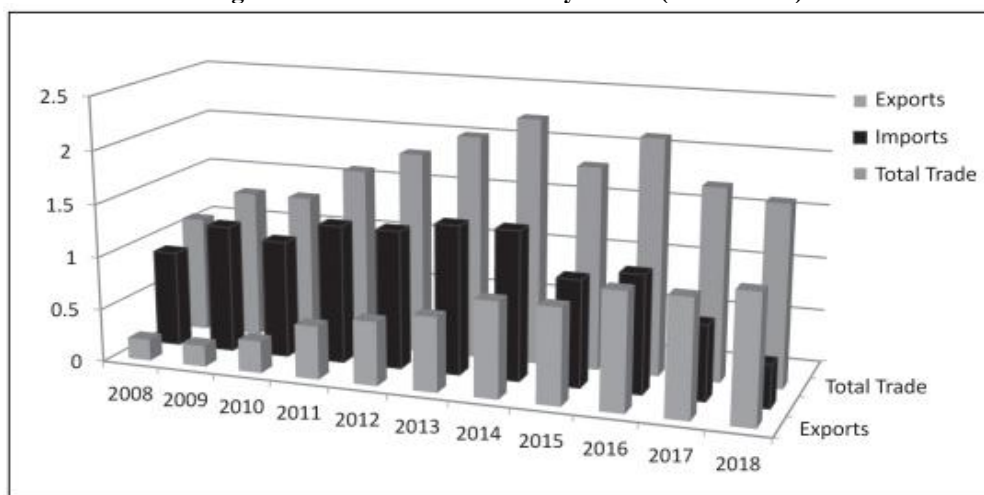
India and Myanmar's commercial ties have grown but remain below potential. Bilateral trade rose from just \$12.4 million in 1980–81 to over \$1.6 billion by 2017–18, though it dipped thereafter due to import restrictions on pulses by India (Export-Import Bank of India [EXIM], 2019). Myanmar's key exports to India include beans, pulses, and timber, while India exports steel, pharmaceuticals, and machinery (ICRIER, 2019).

Figure 1: Myanmar's Foreign Trade (US\$ billion)



(Source: Exim Bank, 2019)

Figure 2: India's Trade with Myanmar (US\$ billion)



(Source: Exim Bank, 2019)

Key agreements, including the Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (BIPPA) and Double Tax Avoidance Agreement (DTAA), have eased regulatory frameworks (MEA, 2012). Yet, bureaucratic hurdles, lack of banking linkages, and border challenges restrict trade growth. India's trade with Myanmar is overshadowed by China, with Beijing dominating Myanmar's external trade through infrastructure and energy investments (EXIM, 2019).

IV. Connectivity and Infrastructure Projects

Myanmar is the linchpin in linking India's Northeast to Southeast Asia under the *Act East Policy*. India has initiated ambitious connectivity projects to enhance regional trade and people-to-people links:

- **Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP):** Linking Kolkata to Mizoram via Myanmar's Sittwe port and inland water transport. This project, though delayed, is geopolitically vital to counter China's expanding presence in Rakhine (Conference Report, 2015).
 - **India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway:** Connecting Moreh (India) to Mae Sot (Thailand) through Myanmar, with planned extensions to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.
 - **Border Roads and Rail Links:** Including the Imphal–Mandalay bus service project and the Tamu–Kalewa–Kalemyo road.
- Delays caused by security issues and bureaucratic inefficiencies have weakened India's credibility compared to China, whose Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects progress at an accelerated pace (Kumar, 2021).

V. Security and Defence Cooperation

Security is a cornerstone of bilateral relations. For India, Myanmar's stability is critical to counter insurgencies in Northeast India, where groups like NSCN(K) and ULFA often exploit Myanmar's porous borders for safe havens (Routray, 2011). Since the 1990s, India and Myanmar have coordinated military operations, including **Operation Golden Bird (1995)** and joint offensives against insurgent camps (The Asian Age, 2012).

Defence cooperation includes:

- Training Myanmar military personnel in Indian institutions.
- Joint naval exercises like IMNEX (2018) in the Bay of Bengal.
- Coordinated border patrolling and intelligence sharing (Kumar, 2021).

India has also supplied military hardware and extended capacity-building support to Myanmar's armed forces. Despite criticism, New Delhi's strategy reflects a pragmatic focus on securing its Northeast against insurgency and countering China's growing defence ties Myanmar.

VI. Energy and Natural Resources Cooperation

Myanmar's hydrocarbon reserves remain a key driver of Indian investment. Indian companies like ONGC Videsh, GAIL, and ESSAR are engaged in oil and gas exploration projects (Trivedi, 2014). India also supports hydropower development in Myanmar, including the Tamanthi and Shwezaye projects on the Chindwin River.

Beyond hydrocarbons, India and Myanmar cooperate in renewable energy and electricity transmission. However, China's extensive involvement in Kyaukpyu port and oil-gas pipelines threatens India's energy security interests in Myanmar.

VII. Cultural and People-to-People Ties

India and Myanmar enjoy strong cultural linkages, particularly given their shared Buddhist heritage. India has invested in restoring Myanmar's cultural treasures, such as the Ananda temple in Bagan and pagodas in Yangon (Embassy of India, 2017). Academic exchanges, scholarships, and ICCR cultural programs have deepened mutual understanding.

The Indian diaspora in Myanmar, though diminished compared to pre-independence era levels, continues to contribute in trade and cultural connectivity. These people-to-people ties, along with Buddhism, help sustain goodwill despite political upheavals.

VIII. Health and Humanitarian Cooperation

India has consistently provided humanitarian and medical assistance to Myanmar. Following Cyclone Nargis (2008), India delivered relief supplies through naval ships (UNEP, 2008). During the COVID-19 pandemic, India supplied vaccines and medicines, reinforcing cooperation in health (MEA, 2020). Such aid strengthens India's soft power in Myanmar, complementing its hard infrastructure investments.

IX. Challenges in the Relationship

Despite progress, India–Myanmar relations face significant constraints:

1. **Political Instability:** The 2021 coup undermined democratic reforms, complicating India's support for democratization while maintaining engagement for security and connectivity interests.
2. **Security Concerns:** Insurgencies in Northeast India remain a central challenge, with smuggling of arms, drugs, and human trafficking across porous borders. Myanmar's northern regions remain hotspots for criminal networks (Sakhujia, 2014).
3. **China's Expanding Influence:** Myanmar is a critical node in China's BRI, with large-scale investments in infrastructure, ports, and pipelines (Sengupta, 2012). This reduces India's relative strategic leverage.
4. **Slow Project Implementation:** India's connectivity projects face repeated delays, undermining its credibility vis-à-vis China.
5. **Border Management:** The Free Movement Regime (FMR) complicates security management, facilitating insurgent movement and migration (Das, 2006).

6. **Economic Limitations:** India's trade remains modest compared to China's dominance. Bureaucratic hurdles, lack of banking facilities, and infrastructural bottlenecks restrict economic growth.

X. Conclusion

The trajectory of India–Myanmar relations demonstrate a blend of opportunity and caution. While Myanmar provides India a strategic gateway to ASEAN, persistent instability, insurgency, and the China factor complicate the partnership. The reforms of the early 2010s created momentum, but the 2021 military coup has reinforced the volatility of Myanmar's political landscape.

For India, pursuing a balanced policy remains critical: support democratic aspirations, but pragmatically engage the ruling establishment to safeguard core interests in security, connectivity, and energy. Speeding up infrastructure projects such as the Kaladan and Trilateral Highway and deepening cultural and people-to-people ties will be essential to build resilience in the relationship. A stable and cooperative India–Myanmar partnership remains central to both nations' futures and to the wider architecture of regional integration in Asia.

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