



India-Myanmar Relations

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This article is based on **“The long and the short of India’s Naypyitaw dilemma”** which was published in The Hindu on 09/02/2021. It talks about the strategic importance of Myanmar and the implications of the recent Coup D’etat.

The long-lingering power struggle in Myanmar has finally ended. The Myanmar junta or Myanmar’s military has toppled the democratically elected government in a **Coup D’etat**. This has smashed decade-long hopes for a truly democratic Myanmar.

As the future of Myanmar’s democracy is now uncertain and given its strategic importance, this Coup D’etat will have geopolitical implications for the region and India.

Strategic Importance of Myanmar for India

- **Background:** India and Myanmar relationship officially got underway after the Treaty of Friendship was signed in 1951, after which the foundation for a more meaningful relationship was established during Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s visit in 1987.
- **Muti-faceted Relationship:** India and Myanmar have traditionally had much in common, with cultural, historical, ethnic, and religious ties, in addition to sharing a long geographical land border and maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal.
- **Geo-Strategic Location of Myanmar:** Myanmar is geopolitically significant to India as it stands at the center of the India-Southeast Asia geography.
 - Myanmar is the only Southeast Asian country that shares a land border with northeastern India, stretching some 1,624 kilometers.
 - The two countries also share a 725-km maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal.
- **Confluence of Two Foreign policy Doctrines:** Myanmar is the only country that sits at the intersection of **India’s “Neighborhood First” policy** and its **“Act East” policy**. Myanmar is an essential element in India’s practice of regional diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific and serves as a land bridge to connect South Asia and Southeast Asia.

- **Competition With China:** If India is to become an assertive regional player in Asia, it has to work toward developing policies that would improve and strengthen its relationship with neighboring countries.
 - However, in pursuance of this, China is a big roadblock, as it aims to diminish India's influence in its neighborhood. Therefore, both India and China are fighting for gaining influence in Myanmar.
 - For example, as part of its policy for the Indian Ocean called **Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)**, India developed the Sittwe port in Myanmar's Rakhine state.
 - The Sittwe port is meant to be India's answer to the Chinese-fronted Kyaukpyu port, which is intended to cement China's geostrategic footprint in Rakhine.
- **Critical For India's National Security Interests:** North-eastern states in India are affected by left-wing extremism and narcotics trade routes (golden triangle).
To counter these threats, the Indian and Myanmar armies have carried out many joint military operations like Operation Sunshine.
- **Economic Cooperation:** Many Indian companies made significant economic and trade agreements in infrastructure and other areas.
 - Some other Indian companies such as Essar, GAIL, and ONGC Videsh Ltd. have invested in Myanmar's energy sector.
 - To elevate its "Made in India" arms industry, India has identified Myanmar as key to increasing its military exports.

Implications of Coup on India

- **Political Realignments:** The coup has attracted strong reactions and the threat of sanctions from the United States and the West. This could lead to unique political realignments in Myanmar.
 - These decisive western sanctions may force Myanmar's military to get closer to China, which may not be in the interest of India.
 - Moreover, a failed Myanmar state at India's doorstep and a weakened Myanmar falling into the clutches of China as a satellite state may increase China's bidding in regional affairs.
- **Rohingya Issue on Back Burner:** Any effort to restore democracy in Myanmar will require supporting Aung San Suu Kyi. However, due to her silence on the Rohingya crisis, the plight of the hapless Rohingya may take a backseat or be conveniently forgotten.
This is not in India's national security interest in the north-east.
- **Catch-22 Condition:** While India's national interests, under the new circumstances, would clearly lie in dealing with whoever is in power in Myanmar, India would find it difficult to openly support the junta given the strong western and American stance.

Way Forward

- **Cultural Diplomacy:** Myanmar's importance to India's conduct of cultural diplomacy through the lens of Buddhism for tourism purposes.
 - India's "Buddhist Circuit" initiative, which seeks to double foreign tourist arrivals and revenue by connecting ancient Buddhist heritage sites across different states in India, should resonate with Buddhist-majority Myanmar.
 - This could also build up India's diplomatic reservoir of goodwill and trust with Buddhist-majority countries such as Myanmar.
- **Improving Connectivity:** India should realize that Myanmar is vital to fulfilling its ambition to become a \$5 trillion economy by 2024.
 - Therefore, facilitating connectivity is central to improving India-Myanmar economic relations.
 - In this context, Infrastructure projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport (KMMTT) should be financed into fruition expeditiously.
- **Resolving Rohingyas Issue:** The quicker the Rohingya issue is resolved, the easier it will be for India to manage its relations with Myanmar and Bangladesh, focusing instead more on bilateral and subregional economic cooperation.
- **Cooperation at Multilateral Forums:** Finally, cooperation in different multilateral forums such as ASEAN and BIMSTEC strengthens the relationship between the two countries.

Conclusion

Given the strategic importance of Myanmar, it is therefore in India's geostrategic interest to see Myanmar prevail as a stable and autonomous country, thereby making possible greater bilateral engagement in India-Myanmar relations.

Drishti Mains Question

Given the strategic importance of Myanmar, the recent Coup D'etat will have geopolitical implications for the region and India. Discuss.



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This editorial is based on **“Staying watchful: On RBI and prices”** published in The Hindu on February 8th, 2020. Now watch this on our Youtube channel.