



INDIA - MYANMAR RELATIONS - GS II MAINS

Q. For economic relations to improve, India and Myanmar must boost their security cooperation at the border. Discuss (10 marks, 150 words)

News: *India reminds Myanmar to return to 'federal democracy'*

What's in the news?

- As conflict intensified between armed resistance groups and the Myanmar military in Chin, Shan and Sagaing provinces, India reminded Myanmar to return to the path of federal democracy.

Key takeaways:

- Both sides held discussions on a wide range of issues covering the situation along the border, security, trade, commerce, connectivity, status of bilateral development projects in Myanmar and concerns related to transnational crimes.
- “The Indian side reiterated its support to Myanmar for a transition towards a federal democracy” said a press note from the Ministry of External Affairs.
- Myanmar’s military has been battling armed insurgents who have forced it out of several townships over the past few weeks.

India's Commitment:

- The Indian side said it continued to support and contribute to people-centric socio-economic developmental projects, including connectivity projects and projects under Rakhine State Development Programme and Border Area Development Programme for the benefit of the people of Myanmar.

Importance of Myanmar:

1. ASEAN gateway:

- The only ASEAN nation that borders India is Myanmar, serving as the country’s entry point into South East Asia as part of India’s “Look East Policy” and “Act East Policy”.

2. Maritime security:

- India built the Sittwe port in Myanmar’s Rakhine state as part of its **SAGAR Vision**.
- The port is India’s response to the **Chinese-fronted Kyaukpyu port**, which aims to solidify China’s geostrategic presence in Rakhine.

3. North-east development:

- The success of infrastructure, developmental projects in the North-Eastern part of India directly depend on the co-operation with Myanmar.



- The Development of **India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT)** trilateral highway.
- **Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport (KMMTT) corridor.**

4. Reduction of illegal migrants coming to India:

- During the recent **Rohingya issue**, 14000 registered and 40000 unregistered refugees came to India.
- A stable Myanmar can prevent the fleeing of refugees.

5. Tackling insurgency in North-east:

- Myanmar shares a 1643 Km long boundary with India's North Eastern State.
- Insurgent groups such as ISCN-K, ISCN-IM have operational bases inside Myanmar.
- The democratically elected government cooperated with India in controlling the insurgent activities especially, the Naga insurgency.

6. China threat:

- Warm relations with Myanmar are necessary to control the growing influence of China in the Asian region.

7. Energy security:

- Myanmar has rich reserves of oil and natural gas. Since India imports nearly 80% of its fuel, Myanmar is important for India.
- Myanmar is potentially an important partner in the energy sector as future offshore gas finds can be piped to India. India currently has a JWG on Oil and Gas and JSC & JWG on Power cooperation.

India - Myanmar Relations:

1. Strategic relation:

- The geographically strategic location of Myanmar makes it a **bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia.**
- Both nations seek to cooperate to **counteract drug trafficking and insurgent groups operating in the border areas.**
- Tatmadaw responded well to Indian overtures and even allowed India to conduct counter-interagency operations against Indian insurgents groups in Myanmar border areas.

2. Infrastructure and Development projects:

- In 2013, India provided a 500 million \$ LOC (**Line of Credit**) for the developmental projects in Myanmar.
- Apart from the above, IMT trilateral highway and **Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport (KMMTT)** are also under implementation.
- **India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) trilateral highway** connects Moreh in the Indian state of Manipur to the Mae Sot in Thailand. This route is interconnected via Mandalay in Myanmar.

3. Defence Cooperation:

- Both the countries conduct a joint military exercise named **India - Myanmar Bilateral Military Exercise (IMBEX).**
- Both the armies jointly carried out **Operation Sunrise** twice.



- Under Operation Sunrise, the India-Myanmar armies jointly target the militant groups that operate in the border states.

4. Economic relations:

- India is Burma's 4th largest trading partner after Thailand, China, and Singapore.
- India is the second-largest export market for Burmese exports after Thailand.
- The bilateral trade stands at approximately **US \$1.6 billion** in 2020-21.

5. Development aid:

- India has committed \$1.7 billion of aid and loans to Myanmar for infrastructure development which is inclusive of faculties and health care centres. This aid is a crucial tool for exercising '**soft power**'.

6. Cultural cooperation:

- India has built on the cultural affinities shared with Myanmar by assisting in **restoration work on Ananda temple in Bagan**. This gives India enormous goodwill.
- A **bust of Bal Gangadhar Tilak in Mandalay Jail** is a symbolic gesture for a closer relationship and understanding of mutual existence.

7. Multilateral cooperation:

- India and Myanmar are leading members of **BIMSTEC, SAARC and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation**, along with Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, helping India develop its influence and ties amongst Southeast Asian nations.

Emerging challenges:

1. China's growing dominance:

- Ever since the coup, China's economic grip over Myanmar has only become tighter with a special focus on projects critical for the **China-Myanmar Economic Corridor**.
- Hence, India needs to have continuous dialogue with Myanmar to keep the security situation in the North east under control.
- Myanmar is also a part of the **Belt and Road Initiative**.

2. Dilemma to engage with the Military regime:

- Since the coup, India has been firm that the gains made by Myanmar over the last decade on the path towards democracy should not be lost.
- Further, any democratic transition in Myanmar cannot be done without involving the Junta, so it is imperative that India keeps all channels of communication open with it.

3. Border & Regional Security:

- The **political instability** in the post-coup period is expected to divert the attention of the Myanmar Army from its periphery and its borders. This may create **tensions at border areas in India (refugees, insurgents, illegal movements)**.

4. Delayed Connectivity Projects:

- Peace in Chin and Rakhine states of Myanmar is essential for the completion of the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the Trilateral Highway project.

5. Trade:

- Bilateral trade between the 2 countries remains **far below potential**.



- A major reason for this is often the movement of infrastructure projects at snail space. Notably, India's project implementation capacity is very lacklustre.
- India imposed restrictions on the import of pulses so as to enhance price realization for Indian farmers. This decision didn't go down well with the Myanmar government because it impacted Myanmar's exports to India.

WAY FORWARD:

1. Security Cooperation:

- For economic relations to improve, India and Myanmar must boost their security cooperation at the border. The more secure the border is, the greater the economic activity will be.
- For example: Part of the reason why the KMMTT has faced delays is that the route of the project traverses a warzone in Rakhine state, where a battle rages on between the Myanmar Army and the Arakan Army rebels on the one hand, and on the other, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army.
- Insurgents from India's Nagaland have also disrupted the completion of the KMMTT project.

2. Handling Rohingya issue with care:

- Myanmar's geostrategic importance to India has meant that Delhi did not take a hardline approach on Naypyidaw vis-à-vis the Rohingya issue, even keeping its distance when Myanmar was hauled into the International Court of Justice over accusations of Rohingya genocide.

3. Cultural diplomacy:

- **India's Buddhist diplomacy** would bolster its tourist industry and could build up India's diplomatic reservoir of goodwill and trust with Buddhist-majority countries such as Myanmar.

4. Cooperation:

- India shares many **common concerns** with Myanmar that range from socio-economic development, similar ecological and climatic concerns, shared concerns over insurgency and regional peace, and preserving sovereignty in light of growing Chinese assertiveness.
- These offer tremendous scope for cooperation. India must seize this chance and expedite the work on ongoing projects while at an equivalent time exercising soft power through constructive aid and cultural exchange.

5. Expanding trade relations:

- While India-Myanmar shares trade relations in many areas, but post-COVID-19 they can expand their trade relations further in areas such as **pharmaceuticals, healthcare, transport, food processing, steel, renewable energy, communication, education** and others which can help both the countries to revive and generate employment.
- Given the sub-optimal performance vis a vis trade and investment, there is tremendous potential and optimism to expand the same.



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The complexity of **India's regional security and neighbourhood** demands India to adopt a more nuanced position without losing its essential pragmatism in engaging with Myanmar.

