



China in India's 'Look East'- Myanmar: Strategic Interests and Security Concerns

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Abstract

Myanmar is a geo-strategic factor in the Asian political dynamics. It is located at the tri-junction of South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia, thereby, historically serving as a trade corridor. Most importantly, it also maps as a critical juncture between India and China, where it shares common borders with the two rising Asian giants- with a 1,643 kilometre border with India and 2,185 kilometre border with China. It acts as a landbridge for both the countries- for India's Northeastern states and Southern provinces of China. This geostrategic location has made Myanmar a strategic convergence point between India and China, through which they can expand their connectivity and cooperative links. In this context, India's concerns over Myanmar emerges from rising Chinese footprints in India's 'Look East'- whereby similar to Pakistan, Myanmar is perceived to be a Chinese proxy for balancing India in the region. While for China, Myanmar acts as a gateway to India's sphere of influence- the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These factors contribute to India's rising security concerns as China's strategic interests in Myanmar pose serious threats to India's maritime and economic interests in the Indian Ocean. In this context, this paper maps out the growing Chinese presence in Myanmar and how it is impacting India's security interests.

Keywords: India, China, Myanmar, strategic interests, security concerns.

Introduction

While India-China relations have made progressive diplomatic strides in the recent past resulting into 2014 marked as the Year of Friendly Exchanges, but there still remains a perennial asymmetry marked in their political and military domain which disturbs the statusquo of the relationship. India and China are both rising powers and emerging economies, equally venturing into the Asian Century- there is a commonality of interests but also a commonality in the aspirations. This aspirational characteristic is thereby, contributing to the imbalance in the India-China relations, making it more competitive than cooperative.

China's game of balancing India in the region has often been argued in its "all weather friendship" with Pakistan, a quasi-alliance where Pakistan acts as a strategic hedge against India, thereby, making it a low-cost secondary deterrent to India. It is greatly perceived that the Sino-Pakistan strategic partnership is mainly directed against India. The majors concerns for India rests on China's nuclear and missile technology assistance to Pakistan as well as in developing projects and infrastructure in area disputed between India and Pakistan. This strategic behaviour of China in encircling India in its own neighbourhood through proxies have created serious security concerns for India.

Apart from Pakistan, which has been an old ally, there have emerged new frontiers where China is trying to offset India. By this policy of engaging with India's peripheries, China has

gained a strategic advantage over India- by making India's neighbours progressively dependent on her for their defence supplies. With such a military engagement in the region China has been able "to keep India strategically 'engaged' through its neighbours." One of such emerging balancing grounds that disturbs India's Look East is China's growing presence in Myanmar- another proxy against India. To this, Mohan Malik, an Indian analyst of Sino-Indian relations has rightly pointed out that Myanmar holds "the same place in China's calculus of deterrence vis-à-vis India in South-Southeast Asia that Pakistan does in South-Southwest Asia"¹. Therefore, the emerging Chinese presence in Myanmar is of big strategic concern for India, having significant security implications.

China's Expanding Influence in Myanmar

Interests and Strategies: China-Myanmar relations have grown significantly since 1988, when Myanmar became a close political and military ally to China in the Southeast Asian region. In the years since the beginning of the diplomatic ties, China has emerged as the biggest investor in Myanmar and its third-largest trade partner and also as the chief supplier of arms to Myanmar. Myanmar has most importantly become a strong base for China's military projections in the region. This military aspect of the China-Myanmar relations has created an anxiety in the Asian neighbourhood, where China is mainly perceived to have strategic ambitions. It is said so with the key shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean and South-east Asia, Myanmar offers China's landlocked inland provinces of Yunan and Sichuan a

trading outlet to the Indian Ocean and the possibility of a strategic presence there, thus escaping U.S. encirclement and containing Indian influence².

China's growing interest in Myanmar can be understood from its vital foreign policy calculations based on Myanmar's strategic geographical location at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, its port on the Indian Ocean and its rich energy and mineral reserves, making it both strategically and economically significant. China's motives to engage in Myanmar can be primarily understood under its three strategic interests: i. energy procurement and energy security, ii. securing access to the Indian Ocean, and iii. security of the border areas and border trade³.

First, to procure and secure energy, China intends to connect to Myanmar by constructing oil, gas and water pipelines. With its booming economy, there is a greater demand for oil and natural gas. With an insecure oil route along the Straits of Malacca, China seeks to develop alternate routes to its energy procurement. To fulfil this objective, China has highly invested in various projects to transport crude oil and natural gas from Myanmar to China. For example, a natural gas pipeline have been laid at a seabed of a gas field called "Shwe" off to the Rakhine State, while a deep-sea port is under construction in Madaya Island near Kyaukpyu- which is said to transport crude oil from Middle East and Africa to Myanmar through a pipeline to the Yunnan province in China. The other infrastructure projects involve the construction of hydroelectric dams in the border areas and along the upper basin of the Irrawaddy River.

Secondly, in securing access to the Indian Ocean, the core objective of China is to establish a strategic network of road, rail and air transport from Yunnan Province in the southwest through Myanmar to the Indian Ocean, as Myanmar acts as the most convenient 'land bridge'⁴ to the Indian Ocean both for its acquisition of trade routes as well as security. This is mainly argued on Chinese interests to avert its insecurity over the 'Malaccan dilemma' which has forced it to look for alternative options by constructing pipelines and building of naval ports in order to secure its Sea Lanes of Communications. In this view, China's various projects in Myanmar needs to be understood. Like, the gas pipeline from Sittwe to Kunming would transport oil from West Asia and Africa bypassing the Malacca Strait by sailing directly to Sittwe, and similarly, the Irrawaddy corridor project would transport goods through Myanmar instead of the Malacca Straits, making trade more secure and time efficient. Therefore, China's objective of using Myanmar as a land bridge is seen as China's 'two-ocean strategy'⁵ to gain access to both the Pacific and the Indian Oceans.

And, thirdly, to secure its border areas and trade, as it is in the best interest of China to maintain a peaceful and stable neighbourhood for its development. There are above 40,000 independent minority armed forces operating along the north and north-east areas of the Myanmar-China territorial boundary,

which pose a threat in terms of stability and safety of southwest China. China is faced with various non-traditional security concerns such as drug trafficking, smuggling, cross-border crime, illegal immigrants, gambling, environmental degradation, illegal *renminbi* (RMB) circulation and money laundering⁶. While China's large scale border trade is operated between the Yunnan province and Myanmar, which has been steadily increasing and plays a major role in the trade between the two countries. The border trade with Myanmar accounts for about 30% of the total trade value of Yunnan Province and about 50% of the transport volume⁷. Therefore, this makes the security along the border areas a major concern for China.

Apart from fulfilling its core strategic interests by various means of infrastructure building, development and economic assistance, China has also adopted significant strategies to contribute in the military and defence build-up of Myanmar. Since 1988, China has supplied Myanmar's army with military equipment including tanks, armoured personnel carriers, military aircraft and artillery pieces such as howitzers, anti-tank guns and anti-aircraft guns. And in addition, the PLA also provides training in the technical use of weapons and weapons system⁸. China is also seen to have delivered 12 Karakoram-8 trainers and 1 ground-attack aircraft, which are produced in a joint venture with Pakistan⁹. Beijing has also helped Myanmar build its own defence industries by setting up small arms factories and naval ship building facilities.

While China has also played a major role in modernisation of several of Myanmar's commercial harbours and naval facilities. It has upgraded the cargo handling facilities at Sittwe, Kyaukphyu, Patheingyi, Myeik and Yangon. And has also built radar, refit and refuel facilities at Myanmar's naval bases at Haingyi, Munaung, Sittwe, Zadetkyi Kyau and Myeik¹⁰. While there is also a growing Chinese interest in building and upgrading the road and rail network from Yunnan in South China to the ports along the Myanmar coast in Bay of Bengal and also building a land route from Kunming in Yunnan to Bhamo in Myanmar and from Bhamo along the Irrawaddy river to the Bay of Bengal. These strategic infrastructure build ups is seen to have military implications as it would give Beijing a strategic foothold in Myanmar¹¹.

Therefore, all these factors have resulted into deepening and expanding of China's engagement with Myanmar, making it 'China's next frontier'¹² which has indirectly set alarm bells ringing in the Asian region and most importantly in Myanmar's neighbourhood.

India's Security Concerns vis-à-vis China in Myanmar

India's interests in Myanmar can be understood in the framework of its 'Look East Policy', which was adopted in the early 1990s as a means to "reconnect and reach out in the civilizational space" India shares with its near neighbours in

Southeast Asia, and catalyse the sharing of capacities and opportunities to improve the economic well-being of peoples of the region”¹³. The crucial factor that makes India's relations with Myanmar relations critically important is its strategic geographical location. For, the Indian north-eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram are geographically inclined to Myanmar; India shares the strategic waters of Bay of Bengal- the Andaman and Nicobar islands; it gives India a geographical contiguity with the Asia-Pacific region- acting as a gateway for India into ASEAN and Southeast Asian politics and; also provides India a transit route to southern China.

Based on these geographical proximities, India's strategic interests in Myanmar are also pragmatically calculated as- ii. India sees Myanmar as an active player in suppressing the minority insurgents in north-east India, ii. the bridge for India's implementation of its 'Look East Policy', iii. an important energy resource base and, iv. most importantly, a significant barrier to the Chinese presence in Indian Ocean. Thus, the growing Chinese presence in Myanmar holds significant implications for India's security.

Chinese infrastructure development in Myanmar having wider strategic ramifications is the central aspect of the growing Chinese involvement in Myanmar that has called for significant attention of India. The expanding Chinese influence holds significant implications for India as it gives the Chinese the strategic advantage to deploy their sea power in India's maritime areas of interests and thereby, posing a direct threat to India's eastern flank. The main concern lies in the fact that there is a possibility of using the infrastructure built by China against the Indian interests.

In this view, the most crucial security and strategic concern for India lies in two key areas: first, the Chinese military build up in Myanmar's Great Coco islands, which is only 20 kilometres away from India's Andaman and Nicobar islands; and second, the reconstruction of the Stillwell Road, of which 1000+ kilometres pass through Myanmar. These military collaboration between China and Myanmar is widely seen to have significant implications on India's security. These military postures seem to present potential threat to the national security of India once China decides to extend its influence into the Indian Ocean. India's concerns over Chinese military facilities to Myanmar is reflected in the anxieties that “[China] is increasing its presence, its navy is growing and we are aware of it. We are conscious about it. We are also developing, modernizing, increasing and building our capacity,” said Air Marshal PK Roy, commander-in-chief of the Andaman and Nicobar Command¹⁴.

India's threat perceptions are aggravated in two aspects¹⁵: first, Chinese support for the up gradation of Myanmar's naval facilities. It is noted that China has built a triangle-shaped series of four naval bases connecting Coco Island, Haigyi island, Mergui and Thilawa, where the Coco Island which is located 20

kilometres away from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is of primary concern for India. And these bases are suspected of being Chinese security agencies to conduct electronic-intelligence and maritime reconnaissance. The perceived threat is that these ports may likely be used as potential support bases for Chinese warships and submarines intended to dominate the Straits of Malacca, and in controlling the SLOC (Sea Line of Communication) through the Indian Ocean to the Middle East.

And secondly, China's sale of sophisticated military technology to Myanmar. The most significant arms agreement between China and Myanmar has been the China's North Industries Corporation (NORINCO) signing a copper mining contract with Myanmar in June 2010. NORINCO is the largest arms manufacturing wing of the PLA. There is a strong Chinese military presence in Myanmar's Tatmadaw air force which is essentially equipped with Chinese MiG-21 (60 J-7s) and MiG-19 (12 J-6 and 36 Q-5) variants. While China is also involved in providing training as in August 2010, the Chinese PLAN (PLA-Navy) conducted a joint exercise with the Tatmadaw navy. This military involvement raises concerns that the deeper strategic military coordination of Myanmar and China will influence Myanmar to comply with the strategic designs of China.

With these ongoing Chinese actions in Myanmar, there are apprehensions on the Indian side that China uses the signals intelligence facilities it had set up in Coco Islands to monitor Indian naval operations at the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as well as its missile and satellite launching facilities along the Indian east coast¹⁶. It is argued that the objective of Chinese presence in the Coco islands and other naval bases in Myanmar is to keep check on the Indian missile test-firing ranges¹⁷. Thereby, it can be stated that for India, the expanding Chinese influence in Myanmar not only impacts India's trade and maritime interests but has strong and severe geopolitical implications in the long run.

Though the constant piling up of security threats at its periphery has prompted India to revise its position on the presence of Chinese bases in Myanmar, but the perception of the Sino-Myanmar bond as a threat to Indian security interests has not diminished. This is because there is an increasing strengthening of the Indian fear of China using Myanmar's bases in future. And this security dilemma has impelled India to focus on building its naval strength.

Conclusion

In the concluding remarks, it can be asserted that though India and China share a competitive economic and security interests in Myanmar but there has not yet been any direct challenge to each other's national interest. It is the commonality of aspirations that is resulting into the threat perceptions whereby China's increasing presence in Myanmar is causing an uneasiness in the Indian security perspectives. It is perceived to be bringing the PLA along the eastern flank of India, thereby,

creating an indirect fallout in the India-China bilateral relations. India's 'Look East Policy' seems to be at crossroads with China's 'Look West Policy'. It therefore, has become essential for India to meticulously deal with the encircling security threats and draw a balance in its engagement with China both at the western and the eastern flanks. And to achieve this objective, India needs to decisively engage with Myanmar by strengthening the economic and strategic ties between the two countries.

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