

Myanmar as a Battleground: India–China Rivalry and the Future of the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

The rivalry between India and China in Myanmar signifies one of the critical dimensions of Indo-Pacific geopolitics, whereby both powers try to exert influence in the wake of political turmoil in Myanmar. This paper examines the historical context, economic interests, strategic security concerns, and the impact of Myanmar's post-2021 coup crisis on this competition. China's Belt and Road Initiative through the CMEC aims at a safe passage to the Indian Ocean to avoid vulnerabilities such as those posed by the Malacca Strait, whereas India's Act East Policy through projects like the KMTTP aims at better connectivity with its northeast and counters Chinese encirclement. Such an analysis would underpin how hitherto several local ethnic armed organizations and the weakened junta have caused disruptions in projects, which act as causal mechanisms that create opportunities and challenges for both countries. Based on realist theory and regional security complexes, this paper will demonstrate that India's mere reactive approach would limit leverage vis-à-vis China's proactive investments, but further supporting the pro-democratic movement in Myanmar may increase India's influence in balancing Chinese hegemony. The implications are going to be an escalation of tensions in the region and potentials for U.S.-India cooperation. Policy recommendations for de-escalation and long-term engagement are included in the study's conclusion.

Keywords: India-China rivalry, Myanmar geopolitics, China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, Act East Policy, Indian Ocean strategy, ethnic armed organizations, post-coup crisis

Introduction

The growing rivalry between India and China, two nuclear-armed nations with developing economies and competing strategic goals, has had a significant impact on the Indo-Pacific region's geopolitical landscape. Due to its strategic location between these titans, Myanmar plays a crucial role in this competition, where local conflicts and ethnic dynamics collide with infrastructure projects, security alliances, and economic investments. Myanmar,



which borders China's Yunnan province and northeastern India, provides both countries with vital access points to the Indian Ocean, which are essential for trade routes, energy security, and regional dominance.

Due to its strategic location, Myanmar has emerged as a flashpoint in the historical competition between China and India for influence in South and Southeast Asia. With programs like the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine, India attempts to thwart China's "String of Pearls" strategy, which aims to encircle India through a network of ports and corridors. This rivalry was made worse by the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, which gave ethnic armed groups (EAOs) territorial control, disrupting important projects and requiring both powers to modify their strategies.

This paper examines the various facets of the rivalry between India and China in Myanmar, emphasizing its historical context, economic motivations, strategic security issues, the effects of the current crisis, and its potential consequences. It asserts, using a realist framework and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), that India's defensive posture—influenced by border security and ethnic ties—offers chances for recalibration through support for pro-democracy forces, whereas China's proactive, investment-heavy strategy has encouraged dependency. The analysis highlights how Myanmar's crisis puts both countries' regional strategies to the test, drawing on recent events up until 2026.

Historical Context

The roots of India-China rivalry in Myanmar trace back to colonial legacies and post-independence border disputes, evolving into a broader contest for regional hegemony. During the Cold War, Myanmar (then Burma) maintained neutrality, but the 1962 Sino-Indian War heightened tensions, with China supporting insurgencies in India's northeast to destabilize New Delhi. India, in turn, provided refuge to Myanmar's dissidents, including during the 1988 pro-democracy uprisings.

Post-1990s, economic liberalization in both India and China shifted focus to Myanmar's resources and strategic position. China's engagement intensified with the 1997 establishment of diplomatic ties, leading to investments in energy and infrastructure. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, positioned Myanmar as a key node in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), aiming to connect Yunnan to the Indian Ocean via pipelines and railways. This countered India's "Look East" policy, rebranded as "Act East" in 2014, which sought enhanced connectivity through projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.

The 2021 coup marked a turning point, as the junta's crackdown led to widespread resistance, with EAOs like the Arakan Army (AA) and Chin National Front (CNF) controlling vast territories. This instability disrupted historical trade routes and amplified cross-border ethnic ties, such as between Chin-Mizo-Kuki communities, complicating India's border management. China's hedging—initially supporting both junta and EAOs—shifted to full junta backing by 2024, brokering ceasefires to protect investments, while India maintained cautious engagement with the regime to safeguard its projects.

Geopolitically, Myanmar embodies RSCT, where South Asian and Southeast Asian security complexes overlap. India's concerns stem from China's potential encirclement, exemplified by ports like Kyaukphyu, while China views Myanmar as a bypass for the Malacca Dilemma, where 80% of its oil imports are vulnerable. Historical grievances, including the 1962 war and ongoing Ladakh standoffs, fuel mistrust, making Myanmar a proxy battleground.



Economic Interests

Economic competition forms the core of India-China rivalry in Myanmar, with both leveraging investments to secure influence and resources. China's BRI has poured over \$20 billion into Myanmar since 2013, focusing on the CMEC, a \$15 billion corridor including the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ), oil and gas pipelines (operational since 2017, transporting 22 million tons annually), and high-speed railways. These projects aim to integrate Myanmar into China's supply chains, providing Yunnan province access to the Bay of Bengal and reducing dependence on Malacca Strait routes. However, post-coup conflicts have stalled progress; the AA's control of key areas in Rakhine State led to no construction in 2023, forcing deadline extensions and reliance on informal routes like railroad-Indian Ocean links via Shan State.

India's economic engagement, though smaller at around \$2 billion in bilateral trade (2025 figures), emphasizes sustainable development under the Act East Policy. The \$484 million Kaladan project connects Kolkata to Sittwe port, then via river and road to Mizoram, aiming to boost northeast trade by bypassing the Siliguri Corridor. Cargo operations began in 2023, but AA capture of Paletwa in 2024 halted roadwork, shifting focus to Zorinpui. India also invests in agriculture and energy, countering China's dominance in dams and power plants (e.g., China's \$2.5 billion gas-fired plant).

The asymmetry is evident: China's Port Park City (PPC) model uses debt financing to gain long-term control, as seen in Kyaukphyu (70-85% CITIC stake), fostering dependency. India's approach is reactive, focusing on transparent aid and multilateral forums like BIMSTEC and ASEAN, but limited by budget constraints. Economic implications include job creation (CMEC at 15% projected) versus environmental costs like deforestation. Myanmar's crisis has amplified these dynamics, with junta dependency on China increasing amid sanctions, while India opposes pro-democracy sanctions to maintain economic ties.

Key Economic Projects in Myanmar

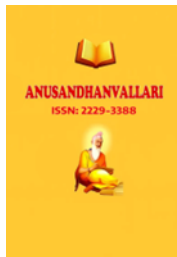
Project	Sponsor	Value	Status (2026)	Implications
CMEC (Pipelines, Railways)	China	\$15B	Stalled in parts due to AA control	Bypasses Malacca, fosters dependency
Kaladan Transit Project	India	\$484M	Partial operation; road delayed	Enhances India's northeast connectivity
Kyaukphyu SEZ	China	\$8.6B	Extensions granted; AA agreements	Potential dual-use port
Trilateral Highway	India-Thailand-Myanmar	\$1B+	Ongoing amid instability	Counters CMEC routes

Source1: https://brimonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/CS_NO_6_MuseMandalay_V1.pdf

Source2: https://rsdebate.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/753085/1/PQ_266_19122024_U2790_p235_p235.pdf

Source3: <https://www.worldports.org/china-and-myanmar-sign-deep-sea-port-deal/>

Source4: Hindustan Times. (2024, March 15). *Completion of the India-Myanmar-Thailand highway will be a game changer*: Jaishankar



Strategic and Security Interests

Strategically, Myanmar is central to both nations' Indian Ocean ambitions. China's "String of Pearls" includes Kyaukphyu as a dual-use port, potentially hosting PLAN vessels, encircling India alongside Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka). Post-coup, China supplied military aid (jets, drones) to the junta, enacted laws for private security in BRI zones, and brokered EAO ceasefires to protect assets. This militarized approach secures rare earth access and projects power into the Bay of Bengal, addressing the Malacca Dilemma.

India's SAGAR doctrine counters this through security provision and partnerships. Concerns include insurgent spillovers into northeast states, prompting \$3.7 billion border fencing and reduced Free Movement Regime in 2024. India resumed arms to the junta (artillery in 2022) but engages Chin groups informally, leveraging ethnic ties for stability. Projects like Chabahar (Iran) monitor Gwadar, while multilateral exercises (Malabar, Milan) enhance naval reach. However, India's reactive stance limits influence over EAOs, unlike China's leverage.

Pakistan's involvement (fighter jets to junta) adds layers, as India views it as part of Sino-Pak encirclement. In Chin State, a "silent battleground," Chinese infrastructure fosters dependency, while India's security ties provide limited counterbalance. Local insurgents control 80% of Chin, demanding fees and aligning pragmatically, exposing projects to risks.

Impact of Myanmar's Internal Crisis

The 2021 coup and subsequent resistance have transformed Myanmar into a contested space, with the junta controlling only 21% of territory by 2025. EAOs like AA, MNDAA, KIA, and TNLA made gains through operations like 1027, but China's interventions (e.g., forcing Lashio return) bolstered the regime. This shifts rivalry dynamics: China's full junta support secures CMEC, but instability disrupts corridors, forcing alternative routes.

For India, resistance control of borders heightens security threats (refugees >30,000 in Mizoram) and project delays (Kaladan). Yet, it offers opportunities: anti-China sentiment among EAOs and public (e.g., resentment over meddling) allows India to build ties via humanitarian aid, education, and diplomacy. Supporting pro-democracy forces (NUG, PDFs) could expedite junta defeat, advancing Act East by securing connectivity in a democratic Myanmar where public opinion favors India.

The crisis tests U.S.-India cooperation: both can provide non-lethal aid, reject sham 2026 elections (9% public support), and engage resistance for stability, countering China's dominance in rare earths and infrastructure.

Implications and Future Prospects

The rivalry between India and China in Myanmar has major consequences for regional stability and the wider Indo-Pacific order. China's strong backing of Myanmar's military junta, through investments and military aid, risks turning the country into a satellite state that strengthens Beijing's access to the Indian Ocean and its "String of Pearls" strategy, encircling India. India's continued support for the junta, meanwhile, exposes it to instability, refugee inflows, insurgent activity across its northeast, and delays in key connectivity projects like the Kaladan Transit Project and the Trilateral Highway, weakening its Act East Policy. Economically, ethnic armed groups such as the Arakan Army have seized control of vital trade routes and ports, disrupting both Chinese and Indian



projects and forcing negotiations with non-state actors. Security tensions are rising as Myanmar's civil war resembles Cold War-style proxy conflicts, with China sustaining the junta and India struggling to manage border crises. Looking ahead, possible scenarios include a junta "victory" through rigged elections favoring China, ethnic group unification that could benefit India, or escalating conflict drawing in foreign powers. To mitigate risks, India is advised to pivot toward supporting pro-democracy forces and diversify supply chains, while China should adopt more transparent financing to avoid backlash. Regionally, stronger enforcement of ASEAN's peace plan is essential. A balanced, inclusive approach could turn rivalry into cautious coexistence, promoting stability and sustainable development.

Conclusion

The rivalry between India and China in Myanmar shows how politics, economics, and local groups together shape the future of the region. China is pushing ahead with its China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), which gives it direct access to the Indian Ocean and reduces its dependence on the Malacca Strait. This is part of Beijing's larger plan to strengthen its influence across Asia. However, Myanmar's ongoing political crisis, civil war, and the rise of ethnic armed groups have made these projects vulnerable and difficult to complete.

India, on the other hand, is trying to counter China's growing presence through its Act East Policy, which includes projects like the Kaladan Transit Project and the Trilateral Highway. These are meant to connect India's northeast with Southeast Asia and reduce isolation of border states. But India's efforts will only succeed if it takes a more proactive role especially by supporting democratic forces in Myanmar and building trust with local communities. If India continues to rely only on cautious engagement with the military junta, it risks delays, instability, and losing ground to China. By contrast, supporting democracy and working with ethnic groups could help India strengthen its position and balance China's dominance.

In the long run, the best path forward for both countries is sustainable engagement that respects Myanmar's sovereignty and local agency. This means avoiding exploitative projects, listening to the needs of Myanmar's people, and cooperating through regional platforms like ASEAN. Such an approach could reduce tensions, prevent escalation, and promote stability in the Indo-Pacific.

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