

[RSTV The Big Picture] India-Myanmar Bilateral Ties & Cooperation

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Introduction:

Myanmar holds a significant place in the **foreign policy of India**. It is the core neighbour in two aspects: First for India's **neighbourhood first policy** and second **Act East Policy** of India. The ties between the nations have changed for better in the last few decades and insurgency in the NE which was a major problem has been dealt effectively.

India-Myanmar bilateral ties:

- India and Myanmar have common historical, cultural, ethnic and religious ties.
- The two countries share a long geographical land boundary and **maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal**.
- They share cultural ties in terms of Buddhist heritage and shared history of colonialism.
- India and Myanmar signed a **Treaty of Friendship in 1951** and the relations are seeing uptrend.



1. Strategic location of Myanmar:

- The nations share **1,600 km** geographical land border and maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal & shares borders with 4 Indian states; **Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India**.
- The border is highly porous, poorly guarded and located along a remote, underdeveloped, insurgency-prone region.
- Also, Myanmar is India's **gateway to South-East Asia**. It is a link pin to connect **India and ASEAN nations**.

2. Multilateral Partnership:

- Myanmar is the key component of India's strategy to connect South and South-East Asia through Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (**BIMSTEC**).
- Myanmar's has gained significance in context with **India's "Act East" policy**.
- Further its membership of **ASEAN**, and **Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC)** has generally been

supportive of India's stand and vision.

3. Economic relations:

- The present bilateral trade between the countries is about **\$ 1.7 BN** till date & is still growing.
- Indian companies have engaged in manufacturing, banking services, power sector etc. in Myanmar.
- India is the **fifth largest trading partner of Myanmar**.
- Myanmar's has **high untapped potential in energy sector**, some of the Indian companies such as Essar, GAIL, and ONGC Videsh Ltd. have invested in it.
- India is investing in **Sittwe port**, Myanmar for making Special Economic zones (SEZs).



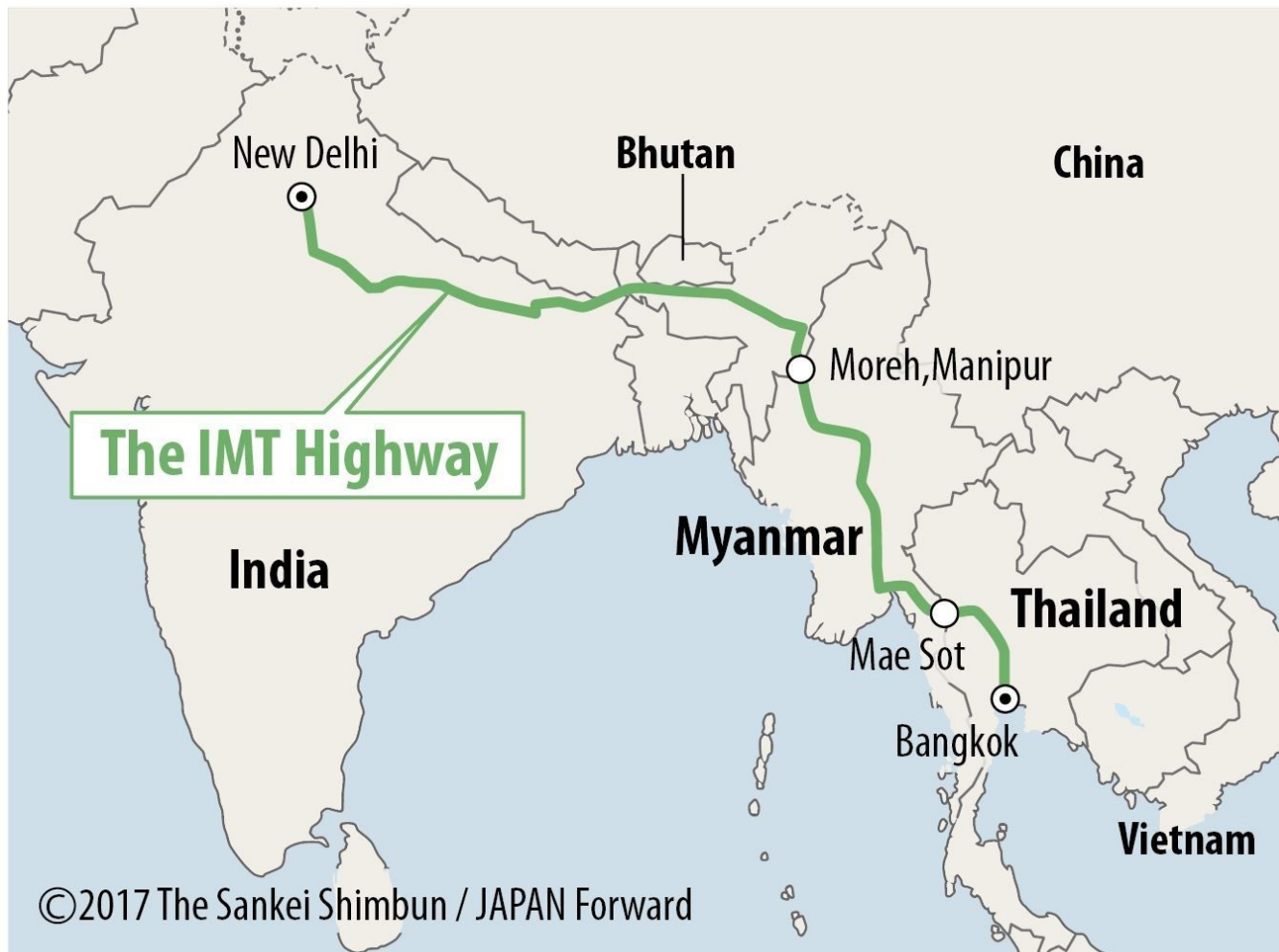
4. Connectivity projects:

Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit transport:

- The project aims to **connect the Kolkata port with Sittwe seaport** in Myanmar by sea. It will then link **Sittwe seaport to Paletwa in Myanmar** via Kaladan river boat route & then from Paletwa on to Mizoram in India by road transport.
- Thus, it will reduce distance from **Kolkata to Mizoram by approximately 1000 km** and cut travelling time to 3-4 days for transport of goods.
- The access to sea the project provides could **boost the economies of North-eastern states**.

India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway:

- India has committed to complete the **3,200-km India-ASEAN trilateral highway** that extends from **Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand** via Mandalay, Myanmar.



5. Defence Cooperation:

- Myanmar is a key partner to **tackle insurgency in North-East** as a large number of cross-border ethnic groups and insurgents from Northeast India have military bases in Myanmar.
- India-Myanmar joint operation destroyed several militant camps of **Arakan Army** on the Indo-Myanmar border.
- It was done to contain threat to the **Kaladan transit and transport project** which is important for improving the connectivity in the Northeast.
- The countries conduct regular joint military exercises like **India-Myanmar Bilateral Army Exercise (IMBAX)**.

6. Cultural ties:

- **Buddhism is the connecting link between both the countries** and India offers a great destination for religious tourism and thereby enhance people to people contacts.

Recent developments between the nations:

India and Myanmar have **exchanged many agreements and MOUs** in a number of fields ranging from infrastructure, energy, communication and health. They include:

1. Combating Trafficking:

- India and Myanmar have signed a MoU on **Cooperation for Prevention of Trafficking in Persons; Rescue, Recovery, Repatriation and Re-Integration of Victims of Trafficking.**

2. Infrastructure:

- The countries have signed **MOUs on Infrastructure** i.e. India building Road in Myanmar, solar panels and resettlement of Rohingyas etc.
- An agreement regarding **Indian Grant Assistance for Implementation of Quick Impact Projects (QIP).**
- The focus is on **development projects under India's assistance particularly in the conflict-torn Rakhine state.**

3. Payment and Currency:

- The two nations also decided to work together to launch **India's RuPay Card in Myanmar** at the earliest and explore the creation of a digital infrastructure.
- On the **proposed creation of an India-Myanmar digital payment gateway**, the countries expressed hope that it would help expand options for cross border remittance between the two countries, **stimulate the economy of Myanmar** and **facilitate tourism and business** from India.

4. Energy sector:

- The countries have agreed to **cooperate in the field of petroleum products**, for cooperation in refining, stockpiling, blending and retail through a Government-to-Government Memorandum of Understanding.

5. Medical sector:

- India will offer medical radiation equipment **Bhabhatron II** for treatment of cancer patients, and strengthen cooperation in the health sector.
- India recently handed over **3,000 vials of Remdesivir** to State Counsellor **Aung San Suu Kyi**, as part of India's contribution to **help Myanmar in its fight against COVID-19.**
- India will help Myanmar with the project of **e-ID cards**, which is modelled after the Aadhaar project.

Way Forward:

The bilateral relationship between the countries can be enhanced by focussing on the following aspects:

- Ground situation assessment of Myanmar.
- **Timely implementation and completion of the projects** undertaken.
- **Hyperactive engagements and follow up meetings** to review the progress of the projects.
- **Increasing people to people ties** and promoting exchange of culture and soft power of India.
- Increasing cultural, religious and medical tourism.
- **Larger Military engagements**, providing military hardware to Myanmar and border security

engagements.

- Moving forward with greater synergy and enthusiasm and **expanding economic relationship** (investments and trade).
- **Recognizing the needs and role of Myanmar** in International forums and groupings like BIMSTEC, etc.
- **Need for frequent dialogues** at local level, business level and political level.
- **Strengthening** the strategic and military relationship.

Conclusion:

Keeping in mind the role of Myanmar in India's neighbourhood and Act East Policy, India needs to increase the **multi-dimensional engagements with Myanmar**. As we dwell in a hostile neighbourhood with expansionist China, added with Rohingya infiltration, India **needs to shun its casual attitude and take its deadlines and relationship with Myanmar seriously**.