# Myanmar and BRI Connect

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**Abstract:** *The BRI-driven plan to link China and Myanmar via trains, roads and ports, is aimed to give Beijing not only an alternative route for fuel and other shipments, but also access to the Indian Ocean. Myanmar is a crucial cog since it enables China access to the Indian Ocean. This serves China's purpose of ensuring its energy supplies, economic and military interests that has implications for India. This article argues that China will continue to engage Myanmar for advancing its geopolitical ambitions.*

**Kewords:** *China, India, Myanmar, BRI, Indian Ocean, Connectivity.*

**Introduction**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) originally announced by Chairman Xi Jinping in 2013 as the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) was enshrined in the Communist Party Charter in the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017 as one of China's major future objectives.[1] The BRI's[2] two components—the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime silk Route (MSR), aimed at putting China at the center of global trade and security. In addition to physical infrastructure, China plans to build special economic zones as well. New strategic territories—defined as the polar regions, the deep sea, cyberspace, and outer space —have also been allied under the BRI umbrella, as illustrated by the Silk Road on ice in the Arctic region, three ocean-based blue economic passages, the Digital Silk Road, and the Space Information Corridor.

Initially the BRI was conceptualized as a "going out"[3] strategy to develop productive outlets for domestic overcapacity and to diversify China's foreign asset holdings. Over a period of time, it became more than an economic strategy- it is linked to China's external engagement policy as a long-term national project with legal sanctity. And one that China would pursue as a part of its national development program with greater awareness of potential threats to Chinese nationals and Chinese assets abroad. With a proposed US$900 billion investment,[4] it is in many ways meeting the needs and filling a void left by International Financial Institutions (IFI) as they moved away from hard infrastructure development. China's new posture to work with the International community for "shared interest" and "shared growth."[5] is a departure from the low-profile foreign policy, premised on Deng's injunction to "bide your time and build your strength" and the transition to an active approach that "strives for achievements".[6]

The BRI is best summed up by President Xi: "China will actively promote international co-operation through the Belt and Road Initiative. In doing so, we hope to achieve policy, infrastructure, trade, financial, and people-to-people connectivity and thus build a new platform for international co-operation to create new drivers of shared development."[7]

**Why does China pursue the BRI?**

The BRI has come under fire due to lack of transparency, weak institutional mechanism, skepticism about Chinese loans leading to debt trap, and poor environmental record etc. Similarly, there is growing sense of alarm over the BRI projects related to space and cyberspace that could increase participating countries' economic dependence on China in ways that might give Beijing greater leverage over them. Again, there is fear that growing reliance on ICT provided by Chinese companies with close ties to China's military and intelligence services could also exacerbate security risks for recipient countries. Similarly, China's investments in ports located in strategic positions have raised concerns about their military intentions. China on its part while recognizing the problems associated with the BRI has been focusing on dispelling the mounting apprehensions not only as a response to criticism but also a reaction to increased competition to its connectivity project. At the second Belt and Road forum Xi Jinping stated that the infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would be financially and environmentally sustainable and deliver high quality infrastructure.[8] The raison d'etre for China's determination to go ahead with the BRI to achieve its multiple objectives can be identified as:

Poverty and underdevelopment are seen as major causes for the rising militancy and separatist movements in China. Beijing hopes its transnational infrastructure-building program will spur growth in China's underdeveloped areas and address the grievances arising from regional disparity. Hence, BRI projects are a part of its strategy to meet some of the challenges arising out of the inequality between China's inland western region with that of prosperous eastern seaboard province, together with the complications arising from the minority population in autonomous regions of Xinjiang and Tibet.

By investing in infrastructure, President Xi Jinping hopes to find a more profitable home for China's vast foreign-exchange reserves, create new markets for Chinese companies, such as high-speed rail firms, and to export some of his country's vast excess capacity in cement, steel and other metals. China requires an outlet for excess capacity in infrastructure construction. This requirement has made China use its BRI projects to provide business opportunities to state owned enterprises (SOEs) and thereby shift construction materials to build highways, ports, bridges and power plants in partner countries. Just as much as it is keen to integrate the underdeveloped regions with its neighbors.

Another important aim is to reduce the geostrategic Malacca Dilemma. China is heavily dependent on Middle East for its energy needs. And almost 80% of this energy supply passes through the narrow Malacca Strait. China is seeking to reduce this dependence so that it can overcome any adverse impact on its energy supply in case there is any disruption on this route by creating an alternate route such as the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). These overland routes are in addition to the maritime route through Southeast Asia, which is perceived to reduce China's reliance on the Malacca Strait as the only trade passage.

Beyond that, the BRI helps address China's long-standing security concerns about U.S. encirclement and maritime chokepoints. Former Chinese president Hu Jintao highlighted these concerns when he referred to the so-called Malacca dilemma, or China's heavy dependence on the unimpeded passage of its oil imports through the Straits of Malacca.[9]

China's concerns therefore, stems from the fact that its economy is fundamentally dependent on the flow of goods, on sea-based trade, and so it has a stake in securing that flow. Consequently, laying the infrastructure to play a role in securing that flow is important. As part of its BRI several major routes are being developed by China. Construction of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and Gwadar port in Pakistan is not simply about reclaiming its glorious past

from the old Silk Road and maritime expeditions. It also resonates China's ambitious intentions to use the port to dock its military ships, patrol the surrounding areas and even check India's position in the Indian Ocean Region.

Besides shedding its insular image, the BRI helps China to advance its soft power diplomacy as well. Earlier in 2015 China adopted a defense white paper that formalized a new maritime strategy encompassing open seas protection for which its naval capacity to protect its overseas interests and assets must increase. This makes a naval presence in the Indian Ocean as integral part of China's maritime strategy.[10]

According to Xi Jinping apart from breaking the bottleneck in Asian connectivity the BRI networks would expand the use of Chinese currency as a global currency that will give China a leverage in the International financial market. As such, Xi Jinping continues to promote the BRI to spur growth, gain access to valuable natural resources and create new booming markets for its goods that allows China to consolidate its position at the centre of global supply and manufacturing networks. And one that also embodies President Xi's China dream of a powerful and prosperous China that has a global sequel and provides a provocative account of China's soft power in relations to its foreign policy

**Why Myanmar matters in China's BR**

The ten countries of that constitute the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN)[11] are geographically, ethnically and culturally diverse. The varying degree of economic dependence on China makes economic considerations influence the relations between the individual ASEAN countries and China.[12] The official blueprint released by the Chinese government in May 2015, clearly stated that Southeast Asia is one of the priority regions for the improvement of physical connectivity under the BRI framework.[13] Southeast Asia is also significant as it serves to establish secure sea routes.[14]

Myanmar is the second largest country after Indonesia in Southeast Asia. According to Tin Maung Maung Than "Geopolitical ramifications for modern Burma have been overwhelmingly determined by bilateral relations with China. Which date back to the early Pyu kingdoms of the ninth century AD."[15] Myanmar's unique strategic geographic location between South Asia and Southeast Asia is crucial since it works as a mid-point key link in China's overland as well as maritime BRI. In the First Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in May 2017, President Xi Jinping in his speech even acknowledged Myanmar in the context of the BRI.[16]

Myanmar is a vital intersection in China's Digital Silk Road that aims to construct communications networks.[17] This is significant since Chinese strategists view space and cyberspace as domains critical to economic development, defense and national security. And that digital economy is expected to be the biggest generator of new market opportunities. As such, China is seeking to widen its long-term interest in connecting with Myanmar's ICT environment is part of this attempt. Chinese firms, such as Huawei, are investing in the development of 5G networks and cloud computing for regional markets, while Chinese e-commerce giants like Alibaba have begun providing e-payment services.[18] Since 2018 the Ministry of Transport and Communications has been working with Huawei in order to deploy 5G broadband services across Myanmar. A further push was given to 5G plans in February 2019 when Huawei pledged to increase digital literacy and usage of Internet in Myanmar. Even though Myanmar is one of the many hosts to the Digital Silk Road, it is a critical node to link the BRI between South Asia and Southeast Asia, with respect to digital connectivity.

China's strategic objectives are particularly apparent when it comes to Myanmar where its investment aligns with its strategy of developing its access to ports and waterways. Myanmar is important in the north-south route to access the Indian Ocean; its long shoreline allows Beijing to bypass the risks associated with trade through the Malacca Strait.[19] Therefore, keeping Myanmar in the loop enables China to bolster its economic and strategic hold on Myanmar besides giving it direct access to the Indian Ocean for the first time in its national history. China's Xinjiang province is connected by highway to Pakistan's lowlands and to the sea. Nonetheless, China cannot rely on this road for its crucial fuel supply because during the winter months snow blocks the road.[20] Myanmar provides China that alternate secure outlet to the Indian Ocean. The Kunming-Kyaukphu railway and pipeline constitute a critical vein of the BRI precisely for this reason.

As a source of energy and a trans-shipment route for China, Myanmar offers access to the Indian Ocean that could allow its sizable oil and gas imports from the Persian Gulf to bypass going through the Strait of Malacca. Since more than 85% of China's trade is seaborne its trade and oil supplies from the middle East makes it imperative for China to protect its interest. Besides it also allows China to link ports it built at Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan. Gaining access to sensitive ports and securing sea-lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), cumulate as far reaching economic, political and strategic advantage.

Myanmar also provides China a new trading route-a waterway from the town of Bhamo in northern Myanmar to the Irrawaddy Delta. Beijing vision to develop a safer trade route via Myanmar's Irrawaddy River was first broached in a September 1985 article in the official Beijing Review weekly that would enable bigger barges could carry Chinese goods down the river. However, many locals are reluctant to support or allow major China-backed port projects in their area. Owing to its geographic location Myanmar inherently became a part of both the economic corridors under the BRI scheme-The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar-Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) and the China-Indochina-Peninsula Economic Corridor (CIPEC) that signal Myanmar's critical role in pushing forward these BRI projects. Beijing proposed the China-Myanmar-Economic Economic (CMEC) as part of the BRI at a time when Myanmar was increasingly under international pressure owing to its conduct towards the Rohingyas and was looking towards China for political and diplomatic support to fend-off mounting international scrutiny. Myanmar and China signed the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) agreement in 2018.

As part of the BRI initiative the CMEC seeks to connect China's Yunan Province, Yangon and Mandalay with the proposed major roads and railways. The establishment of the BRI driven corridor will run from China's Yunan province to Mandalay, Yangon and Kyaukphu. Special Economic Zone (SEZ) forming a "Y-shape" corridor involving basic infrastructure, construction, manufacturing, agriculture, transport, finance, human resources development, telecommunications, and research and technology. The deep-sea port in conflict driven Rakhine state, a special economic zone on the border, a new city project in Yangon aims at fostering greater bilateral economic integration through the formation of joint industrial zones and further lowering of trade barriers. Simultaneously allowing Beijing an alternate route for fuel and other shipment. With Naypyidaw being receptive to Chinese initiatives, Beijing is likely to prioritize the CMEC, as it remains the shortest route for China to reach the Indian Ocean and beyond. On completion of the Maritime Silk Route that encompasses major ports such as Kyakhphu in the Bay of Bengal for example, would give China de-facto access to the Indian Ocean. Even though the Kyaukphyu port when operational is not officially meant to serve as a base for China's Navy and the 2008 Myanmar Constitution states unequivocally "no foreign troops shall be permitted to be deployed in the territory of the Union." Yet it does not rule out the possibility of China using it for more than just trade. The fear of ports being put to use in future for military use is not unfounded against the background of China building a naval base in Djibouti when it departed from its position that

China "does not station any troops or set up any military bases in any foreign country" as a matter of policy. [21] Just as it highlighted the role assigned to the PLA as a part of its "new historic mission" in protecting China's expanding national interests.[22] China's Ministry of National Defense publicly denies that BRI has any military or geostrategic intent[23] however, given the fact that Beijing has created an overall geographic expansion of China's activities that will inevitably require both state and military protection has led to accelerated concern about China's intent. Besides, the 2015 defense white paper had laid an unprecedented emphasis on maritime interests and on the PLA's responsibility to protect them as one of its core missions.[24]

President Xi Jinping's visit to Myanmar in January 2020 confirms the narrative of strengthening of the two countries' millennia-old pauk-phaw friendship and their renewed commitment to cooperate.[25] Chinese State Counsellor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi went a step ahead to describe the relationship between the two countries as a "baobo" (friends and relatives).[26] President Xi Jinping visit marked the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Myanmar and was also the first Chinese leader in 19 years to visit Myanmar.[27] Jiang Zemin was the last Chinese president to visit Myanmar, when he had signed several economic and border agreements in 2001.The stated aims of the visit were articulated by Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui during media interactions in Beijing on 17 January 2020, were to strengthen relations; deepen Belt and Road Initiative cooperation and to "materialise" the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) i.e., the Myanmar component of the belt and road initiative.

The two countries inked a number of deals to speed up infrastructure projects as well as shoring up key projects that are a part of the flagship BRI, and agreeing to speed up the implementation of the CMEC. The highlight of his visit was the signing of 33 agreements,[28] and Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Among the most important was the substantial deal covering the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) - a 1,000-hectare industrial park and deep seaport project that will serve as the end point of the CMEC and connect southwestern China to the Indian Ocean. This is noteworthy because the foundation of Chinese strategic interest in Myanmar has been laid at the port of Kyaukphyu, around which a number of additional projects will develop, including transportation circuits, SEZs etc. It is important for China because Kyaukpyu is the terminus of previously built oil and gas pipelines running to China, and provides Beijing

with an alternative route for energy imports that circumvents the Malacca Strait and alleviates China's reliance on the Straits of Malacca.
The Economic Cooperation Zone straddling the China-Myanmar frontier would open the two sides' common border that would advantage China strategically. The establishment of the Border Economic Cooperation Zone encompassing land on both sides of the two sides' border at Muse in northern Myanmar and Ruili in southern China hold the potential to China a balance of power tilting Indian Ocean force.[29] The Yangon New City project will enable China expand its commercial influence into the heartland of Myanmar. Additionally, Beijing's desire to push the BRI through Myanmar and keeping other major powers at bay enables it to ensure the energy supplies, maintain its economic growth and secure its military interests and infrastructure development either in the form of ports or Economic cooperation zone etc. gives China a competitive edge. Therefore, Myanmar becomes a crucial cog in the BRI that strategically places Myanmar as the fulcrum in China's geopolitical ambition and in safeguarding its core strategic interests.

Although the Southeast Asian countries in general have largely welcomed BRI from a strictly economic standpoint primarily because they need infrastructure and want investment, at the same time there is growing unease. In a survey across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, 70 percent of respondents said their governments should be cautious in negotiating BRI projects to avoid falling into unsustainable financial debts with China.[30]What may appear to be a mutually beneficial quid pro quo may not play out well for Myanmar. Activists and experts have expressed concern over the lack of proper environmental and societal impacts of the BRI projects. Besides bending too much towards China can leave the government vulnerable to accusations by political opponents of selling out the country to China. Anti-Chinese sentiment in Myanmar that has grown over the years and civil society concerns are not without weight in Myanmar: the long mooted Myitsone Dam project that would have exported 90% of its electricity to China came to a halt in 2011 and Chinese attempt to re-start it has faced a strong backlash.

Myanmar's apprehensions became apparent when Myanmar's Planning and Finance Minister Soe Win's made a statement wherein he expressed that Myanmar would ask China to downsize the Chinese mega-project- whether it is the Kyaukpyu SEZ in Rakhine State of Myanmar, a new deep Sea Port and the industrial park.[31] The minister argued that the China led Kyaukpyu SEZ required downsizing because "the bigger the projects, the bigger the responsibility to pay

back."[32] Sean Turnell, a senior economic consultant to Suu Kyi expressed similar concerns when he said that the 7.5 billion deep-sea ports was way beyond what Myanmar needs.[33] Similarly in the Third Belt and Road Summit in Hong Kong, Myanmar's Union Minister for the Ministry of the Office of the Union Government and the Chairman of Myanmar' Investment Commission Thaung Tun, while dismissing the fear of the debt trap cautiously admitted that Myanmar was aware of the Sri Lanka experience and would not rule out downsizing the project and ensure that Kyaukphu port is a workable project.[34] China has been responsive to requests made by Myanmar; It is possible that China's adaptability has made BRI resilient and attractive to Myanmar despite popular concerns. Therefore, while the BRI presents both risks and opportunities, Myanmar finds the BRI packages persuasive.

**BRI and COVID-19**

Even before COVID-19, The BRI had been facing criticism for lack of transparency, fears of debt-trap diplomacy among many other issues. With the ongoing pandemic speculations surrounding the fate of the BRI re-surfaced. Earlier in 2017 at the first BRI Forum, Beijing Communique of the Belt and Road Health Cooperation and Health Silk Road[35] was issued. Since that time China initiated several health cooperation projects with its neighbors. One such project was the China-ASEAN Human Resource Training Program of Health Silk Road, that aimed to train more than 1000 ASEAN healthcare professionals by 2022.

The COVID-19 presented challenges for the BRI, in many ways it also provided an opportunity to fill the gaps in the insufficiencies in healthcare especially in the developing countries through its Health Silk Road and Digital Silk Road. China has been sending medical supplies and personnel to Myanmar[36] as apart of its larger deployment of COVID diplomacy. The meeting between Chinese Ambassador Chen Hai's with Deputy Minister for Planning, Finance and Industry U Set Aung regarding the implementation of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) project — which falls under the BRI — as an attempt by China using soft power[37] to push such projects through. The discussions took place after Myanmar released the COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP).[38] China however cannot ignore that its efforts to accelerate the Health and Digital Silk Road will greatly depend on its ability to garner support from host countries that includes Myanmar as well as its ability to separate geopolitical competitions and contentions with BRI projects.

**Implications for India**

In the words of U Thant Myint, "Myanmar is a 'missing link' between the two massive neighbors of Asia having a combined population of over 2.5 billion. It lies at the crossroads of the world's biggest democracy and world's biggest communist state".[39] Myanmar is the meeting point for India and China therefore, China's attempts to use Myanmar's ports for its own trade through in the BRI scheme may find India and China with overlapping interests- both geopolitical and economic.

There is no discounting Chinese maritime assertion South China Sea as well in other areas where Beijing might have strategic interests including critical spaces in the Indian Ocean, necessitates that India take note of Chinese maritime tactics. The entire Indian Ocean region stretching from east African coast to the waters of the SCS is critical for India's foreign trade, energy and national security interests. Similarly, the waters of the South China Sea (SCS) are also important since more than 55% of India's trade with the Asia pacific passes through the SCS. And as such India has an interest in protecting the sea lanes as it considers open and stable maritime commons essential to international trade and security.

The regular presence of Chinese non-military vessels, including its coast guard and fisheries fleets, that often work to achieve strategic goals is an instructive pointer for India. China depicts its non-military bodies as "law-enforcement agencies," the fact is they are centrally controlled. Even a relative increase in the presence in the Indian ocean could complicate the security situation in littoral South Asia.

India is watchful since China's economic interests and investments aligns with its strategy of developing access to ports and waterways etc. in the BRI are closely intertwined with its geopolitical ambitions and objectives. The Maritime Silk Route (MSR) has to be seen within the broader context of the strategic competition between India and China, where India views the MSR and China's broader BRI as a part of China's larger strategy of challenging Indian security and broader strategic interest in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, India is uneasy and concerned about the consequences of China using Myanmar to achieve its core strategic interests.

As part of its policy for the Indian Ocean called Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), India is developing the Sittwe port in Myanmar's Rakhine State. This port, which sits geo-strategically on the Bay of Bengal, serves as a critical node of the KMMTT initiative to connect South-west Myanmar to India's Northeast. India's long-term strategic goal is to create a special economic zone surrounding the Sittwe port and, in so doing, cement India's geostrategic

footprint in the Rakhine and solidify its presence in the Bay of Bengal. This can therefore be seen as a remedy to the Kyaukpyu port, which seeks to entrench China's geostrategic footprint in the Rakhine.

Together with the sovereignty-related issues concerning the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and broader geopolitical implications within the Indian Ocean Region, the India is also focusing on the obstacles it is facing in completing its connectivity projects such as the Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP). The latest speed breaker added to the long list of hurdles is the resistance posed by the Arakan Army (AA). The KMMTT project traverses a warzone in the Rakhine State, whereby a battle rages on between the Myanmar Army and the Arakan Army rebels and Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. The AA's influence extends to Chin state where Paletwa river port is located. Unlike the Chinese projects such as the Kyaukphu deep sea port, the Chinese oil pipelines and railways and roads that pass through the Rakhine and Chin provinces that are left undisturbed, there have been incidents of kidnapping of Indian officers and workers, as well as, demanding huge sums of money from contractors who are engaged in the KMMTTP project.

The BRI-driven plan to link China and Myanmar either in the form of trains, roads and ports, do not directly impinge upon India's connectivity projects with Myanmar. However, since the defining interdependency between China and Myanmar gets entrenched even deeper through China's engagement of Myanmar is something that India is worried about. It is 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. New Delhi policymakers do not want a weak Myanmar state at India's doorstep having to lean heavily on China and pressured into acting on Beijing's bidding. Hence, without colliding head-on with China, New Delhi has been scouring for ways to help Myanmar to be democratically vibrant.

While on one hand Myanmar's eagerness for engagement with China, can be argued as being driven largely by its international isolation, and the need for economic assistance, what must not be lost sight of is that Singapore and not China which is presently the largest foreign investor in Myanmar.[40] Myanmar currently has more options for trade and investments from other Asian states, such as Japan, Korea, Thailand etc. This bodes well for India since it weans Myanmar away from depending excessively on China. It is in India's interest to

draw advantage of the fact that China needs Myanmar more than Myanmar needs China[41] that allows a more level playing field.
Myanmar is significant to fulfilling India's ambition to become a $5 trillion economy by 2024.[42] At present its economic engagement with Myanmar lags far behind that of China. This means India will have to scale up India-Myanmar economic ties. It is incumbent on India to bring the projects and infrastructure development it has undertaken into fruition expeditiously. Envisioning the potential in India-Myanmar relations bilateral commitments have to be translated to practical outcomes within the promised time line.

In a crucial outreach after months of pandemic the visit by Chief of the Indian Army Staff Gen. Manoj Naravane and Foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla to Myanmar during October 4-5, 2020[43] is in keeping with the ground reality in Myanmar- the cohabitation in Myanmar of the military and civilian regime. The visit reflected the high priority both countries attach to sustaining the momentum in their expanding bilateral ties. It also provided an opportunity to review the progress in bilateral relations, which in recent years have been distinguished for the regular high-level visits and interactions. The meeting of the Indian Army Chief separately with the Vice Senior General Soe Win, Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Myanmar Armed Services, indicated that security relations and army to army contact continues to be an integral part and parcel of India Myanmar ties. Given the significance of infrastructure and connectivity proposals both sides discussed their progress and agreed to further strengthen their partnership in connectivity projects. They agreed to work towards operationalization of Sittwe Port in the Rakhine State in the first quarter of 2021.[44] A major takeaway from the visit was India's proposal to build $6-billion petroleum refinery project near Yangon. This would establish India's credentials as a sustainable development partner at the same time widen the scope for Myanmar to diversify. New Delhi's military-diplomatic outreach to Myanmar is a cornerstone of its Act East policy and India's engagement and interests in Myanmar is much more than having to do simply with one eye on China. The fact that Myanmar has begun to vaccination with the 1.5 million doses of Covid vaccine sent by India, while putting China's 300,000 doses on hold is one such validation.

The State of Southeast Asia 2021 survey asserts "two juxtaposing trend lines with regard to Southeast Asian perceptions towards China, as simultaneously the most influential and most distrusted power in the region". This may have connotations for India's Myanmar engagement through its AEP and assist policy makers calibrate how best to reach out towards the Southeast Asian region.

**Conclusion**

From the above discussion one can conclude that Myanmar as a land bridge is arguably not only an important constituent of the BRI but also the key to the success of the BRI. Myanmar is vital for China to capitalize on the convergence of the development strategies between the two countries. Hence, it is no wonder that China lays enhanced focus on Myanmar within the BRI. After all, in the end, it is its links through Myanmar, if successfully implemented, allows China to further its core national interests.

As for Myanmar, it sees China as an indispensable ally that has shielded it from some of the international censure, giving it political, economic security assistance and diplomatic cover. India needs to understand that the defining interdependency between Myanmar and China is likely to continue for the immediate future. It is therefore, in India's geostrategic interest to see Myanmar prevail as a stable and autonomous country. Naypyidaw in the years to come will matter increasingly, more so, if India is keen to augment its standing in the Indo Pacific.

**Table 1: Bilateral Trade between Myanmar and China (2015-2019)**

| **Year** | **2015 (in US$)** | **2016 (in US$)** | **2017 (in US$)** | **2018 (in US$)** | **2019 (in US$)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Myanmar's Import from China | 6.43 billion | 5.40 billion | 6.11 billion | 6.22 billion | 6.45 billion |
| Myanmar's Export to China | 4.51 billion | 4.77 billion | 5.39 billion | 5.56 billion | 5.71 billion |
| **Total Volume of Trade** | **10.94 billion** | **10.17 billion** | **11.50 billion** | **11.78 billion** | **12.26 billion** |

*Sources: UN Comtrade database retrieved from https://comtrade.un.org/data/, accessed on March 06, 2021 at 2200 IST hrs*

**Table 2: Approved China's Investment in Myanmar (2018-2021)**

| Year | 2016-17 | 2017-18 | 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 (As on 31/12/2020) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Amount of Invest (in US$) | 482.591 million | 1395.219 million | 634.577 million | 553.310 million | 133.531 million |

*Source: Directorate of Investment and Company Administration, "Foreign Investment By Country", Ministry of Investment and Foreign Economic Relations (MIFER), The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, retrieved from https://www.dica.gov.mm/sites/dica.gov.mm/files/document-files/yearly_country_14.pdf, accessed on March 06, 2021 at 2300 IST hrs).*

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