

# The Role of Myanmar in the Sino-India Competition: Pawn or Pivot?

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## Abstract

India has pursued the policy of “Look East” to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with East and Southeast Asian nations, address its security concerns and bolster its standing as a regional power. Since the early 1990s, China has developed interests in Indian Ocean. Its growing influence over some regional countries and its increasing presence in Indian Ocean have alarmed the other regional countries. Indo-Pacific region is the place where the India’s “Look East” and China’s “Go West” policy meet. Geographically, Southeast Asia peninsula is the land-bridge that connects Pacific and India Oceans. With widespread concern for the security and stability of Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN needs to be a dynamic key player in the regional geopolitical and geostrategic competition. One of the ASEAN member countries, Myanmar, is the India’s land gateway to Southeast Asia and the only country in Southeast Asia that share border with China and has access to Indian Ocean. That is why Myanmar’s geopolitical location in Indo-Pacific region is of crucial importance for China and India. However, if the country could not utilize its position smartly, it might become a pawn in the regional powers competition. This research analyzes the significance of Myanmar’s geographical location and argues the possibility of Myanmar becoming a pawn in the regional, competition especially in the rivalry between China and India. In doing research, qualitative research method is used to analyze the primary and secondary data in open literature.

**Keywords:** China, India, India’s Look East Policy, Pawn

## Introduction

Charles Ikins defines the Indo-Pacific as the entire area of the combined Indian and Pacific Oceans and their littoral nation-states.<sup>2</sup> Living nearly half of the world’s population, rich in natural resources, especially hydrocarbons (petroleum and natural gas), and sea lanes of communication for the world’s most vibrant military, economic and industrial powers, the Indo-Pacific regions become the principal theatre of strategic competition among established and emerging powers. Geographically, the Southeast Asia peninsula is the land-bridge that connects the Pacific and India Oceans. Myanmar which is located at the western edge of Southeast Asia, adjoining South, Southeast, and East Asia. As a country that faces (Northeastern) Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea in the Indian Ocean is positioned to play an important role in the Indo-Pacific region.

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<sup>2</sup> National Geographic. accessed 15 May 2012, <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/mapping/interactive-map/?ar a=1>.



Figure1: Indo-Pacific Region<sup>1</sup>

Among leading regional powers in the Indo-Pacific region, India adopted the Look East policy to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with the nations of Southeast Asia, bolster its standing as a regional power and counterweight the strategic influence of China. As for China, with the introduction of market reforms by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, China's economic growth increased. Since the early 1990s, China has also developed interests in the India Ocean. In his book *The Look East Policy and India's Northeastern States*,<sup>2</sup> Shibashis Chatterjee (2014) wrote that the economic regeneration of the relatively backward Northeastern states of India required a new imagination of extended neighborhoods. Sharing linguistic roots, culture, tribal, and physical connectivity between the Northeast of India and some Southeast Asian states via Myanmar makes it possible to realize this vision. However, W. Boswell (2016)<sup>3</sup> argued that responding to Myanmar's domestic political reforms and concerns about rising Chinese influence, India implemented a more aggressive engagement strategy with Myanmar. The importance of improved connectivity in the Indo-Pacific for China trade is not to be underestimated. In the article "Myanmar as a Geopolitical Pivot in Indo-Pacific Region", written by Maung Aung Myoe (2019), he discussed that Myanmar is positioned to play an important role in the Indo-Pacific region as Myanmar's natural resources, on land and in the sea- including Economic Zone and its geographic location are assets for her to be a geopolitical pivot.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Beijing and New Delhi paid attention to the Indo-Pacific region for their interest. Myanmar's geostrategic position is imperative in the power rivalry between China and India. In the above-mentioned studies, however, they did not discuss whether Myanmar may be a pawn in the Indo-China competition.

**Methods:** This is qualitative research analyzing the primary sources of surveys conducted by scholars or media or organizations and official government statements and the secondary source of scholarly articles. The geopolitics approach is used in doing research.

<sup>1</sup>National Geographic, available at [http://education.nationalgeographic.com/mapping/interactive-map/?ar\\_a=1](http://education.nationalgeographic.com/mapping/interactive-map/?ar_a=1), accessed 15 May 2012, p.121.

<sup>2</sup>Shibashis Chatterjee. *The Look East Policy and India's Northeastern States* (Singapore: A Graduate school of Nanyang Technological University, March 2014) 1.

<sup>3</sup>William E. Boswell. "Myanmar in a Balance", *Army War College Review* 2, no. 2 ( May 2016 ) 16.

<sup>4</sup>Maung Aung Myoe. *Myanmar as a Geopolitical Pivot in Indo-Pacific Region* (Nay Pyi Taw: National Defense University 2015 ) 240.

**Conceptual Framework:** This paper uses Zbigniew Brzezinski's concepts of geopolitical pivots to explain the significant role of Myanmar in the Sino-Indian competition. According to him, "geostrategic players" are the states that have the capacity and the national will to exercise power or influence beyond their borders in order to alter the existing geopolitical state of affairs. There are not so many countries in the world that could be considered as geostrategic players. "Geopolitical pivots", on the other hand, are the states whose importance is derived not from their power and motivation but rather from their sensitive location and the consequences of their potentially vulnerable condition for the behavior of geostrategic players. Brzezinski further explained; "most often, geopolitical pivots are determined by their geography, which in some cases gives them a special role either in denying access to important areas or in denying resources to a significant player. In some cases, a geopolitical pivot may act as a defensive shield for a vital state or even a region. Sometimes, the very existence of a geopolitical pivot can be said to have very significant political and cultural consequences for a more active neighboring geostrategic player".<sup>1</sup>

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **(a) Sino-Indian Competition in the Indo-Pacific Region**

With the rise of China, the emergence of India, and the resurgence of Japan, among others, the Indo-Pacific region has become a new strategic center of gravity in international affairs. India has pursued a policy of "Look East", which was developed and endorsed by Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao (1991-1996) and followed by successive governments. The aim is to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with East and Southeast Asian nations for addressing its security concerns and bolstering its stand as a regional power.<sup>2</sup> India's Look East Policy has found its wings as far as building bilateral and multilateral alliances with most ASEAN member states in the commerce, culture, and defense sectors.<sup>3</sup> China sees India's Look East Policy is a conscious attempt to checkmate China's quest for regional expansion of its power.

At the same time, India has strengthened its naval (and air) presence in the Indian Ocean by establishing the Andaman and Nicobar Command in 2001. The Andaman and Nicobar Command is the first and only Tri-service theater command of the Indian Armed Forces, based at Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which is a Union Territory of India. Its location is very important for India because it lies in the Pacific-Indian ocean trading route which passes through Malacca Strait. Moreover, these islands are located very close to Southeast Asian nations, especially Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand and because of close proximity and strength of the Indian navy in the Indian Ocean, India acts as a net security provider for these nations at sea. Thus, the location of these islands is important for increasing Indian influence in the Southeast Asian region. In the context of growing Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific region, these nations look forward to India to curb Chinese influence in the region and the current geopolitical scenario provides India an opportunity to play as an important regional power and increase his influence in Southeast

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<sup>1</sup>Zbigniew Brzezinski. *The Grand Chessboard- American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1998 )23-7.

<sup>2</sup>Maung Aung Myoe. "Myanmar as a Geopolitical Pivot in Indo-Pacific Region", National Defense University Magazine, 2015, 239.

<sup>3</sup>Hernit Kaur Kang. *India and Myanmar Looking East through a Strategic Bridge* (New Delhi, IPCS, 2010 ) 4.

Asia. India sought to safeguard its strategic interests in Southeast Asia and the Strait of Malacca by increasing rapid deployment of military assets in the region and it drew criticism from China stating that the Indian Ocean should not be “India’s Ocean”.

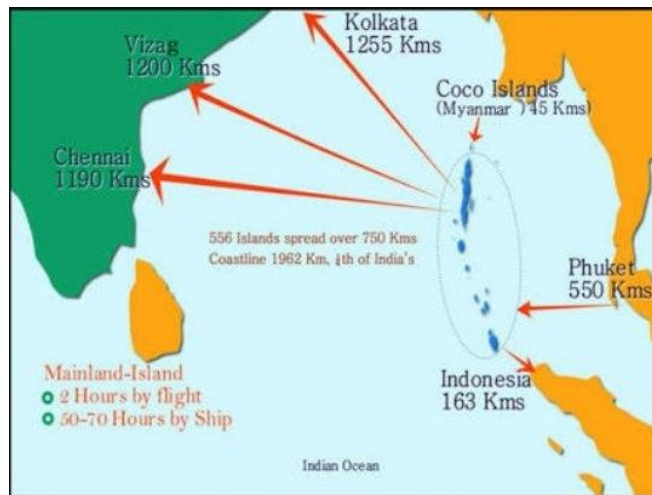


Figure 2: the Andaman and Nicobar Command<sup>1</sup>

Since the early 1990s, China has advanced its presence in the Indian Ocean. Growing Chinese influence in some regional countries and its increasing presence in the Indian Ocean have alarmed the United States and some other regional powers. China’s handling of the South China Sea claimant issues and increased access to the Indian Ocean was part of its “String of Pearls” approach. This approach has expanded China’s commercial and naval presence at the ports throughout the Indian Ocean, including Great Coco Island in Myanmar, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Gwadar in Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> Chinese activity drew resentment from India because India believes that it has the right to dominate this region.



Figure 3: String of Pearls<sup>3</sup>

China also has its vision and mission to establish its influence in both Pacific and Indian oceans as it has the ambition to become a two-ocean (the Pacific Ocean and India Oceans) maritime power by the middle of the 21st century. A recent Chinese diplomatic

<sup>1</sup><<https://www.quora.com/How-are-the-Andaman-and-Nicobar-Islands-strategically-important-to-India>>

<sup>2</sup>William E. Boswell. “Myanmar in a Balance”, *Army War College Review* 2, no. 2 (May 2016) 15.

<sup>3</sup>Kuldeep Singh Chouhan, “String of Pearls”, accessed 1 June 2012, <http://kuldeepsinghchouhan.blogspot.com.au/2010/07/china-string-of-pearls-strategy.html>.

initiative labeled as “Go west” is a plan to build “a belt a road” in the region. It is called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) referring “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the 21st century “Maritime Silk Road”. The idea and concept of Maritime Silk Road (MSR) were first presented by Chinese President Xi Jinping in his speech in Indonesia’s parliament in October 2013. President Xi Jinping argued that “a belt and a road” is “the path to mutual benefit and win-win (cooperation)” among the regional countries. China's "going west" strategy is driven by its geopolitical concerns and regional security threats, such as terrorism.<sup>1</sup> ASEAN is a key part of the Maritime Silk Road of the BRI. While there is a shortage of infrastructure investment to meet the needs of developing nations across the Indo-Asia-Pacific region, most nations have welcomed the opportunity to bid for Chinese funding.

At the same time, there are growing questions about the economic viability and the geopolitical intentions behind China’s proposals. So far MSR initiatives have mainly been concentrated in the littoral states of the Indo-Pacific region, especially port-development projects, which is raising questions about whether these investments are economic or military in nature. These large-scale investments are also structured in ways that invite questions about the potential for China to exert undue leverage over the domestic and foreign policies of heavily indebted recipient countries.<sup>2</sup> It is also believed that China’s high-profile diplomacy in the region is a response to India's “Look East” policy.

### **(b) Myanmar’s Geostrategic Position in Indo-Pacific Region**

The Indo-Pacific region is important for both China and India not only for the supply of resources but also regards as within its rightful sphere of influence. For both China and India, Myanmar’s geostrategic location at the tri-junction of East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia is of critical significance. Geographically, the Southeast Asia peninsula lies east of the Indian subcontinent and south of China and is bordered by the Indian Ocean to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east. Southeast Asia holds some important chokepoints, the most significant one being the Malacca Straits, which could deter the flow of international trade and energy supplies. For the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN has to handle smartly in the regional geopolitical and geostrategic competitions among great powers. Myanmar is a Southeast Asia country and a member of ASEAN. Geographically, Myanmar is located at the western edge of Southeast Asia, adjoining South, Southeast, and East Asia. Its 2228km (1385 miles) long coastline, stretching from the mouth of Naff River to the Bayintnaung Point, could make Myanmar a regional maritime power that dominates the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea if the country develops solid maritime doctrine and strategy.<sup>3</sup> As a country that faces (Northeastern) Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea in the Indian Ocean, Myanmar is positioned to play an important role in the Indo-Pacific region. Myanmar’s natural resources, on land and in the sea- including its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and its geographic location are assets for her to be a geopolitical pivot.

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<sup>1</sup>Maung Aung Myoe. *Myanmar as a Geopolitical Pivot in Indo-Pacific Region*( Nay Pyi Taw: National Defense University, 2015 ) 240.

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c\\_133062675.htm](http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm) .

<sup>3</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar> .

### (c) Myanmar in China's Geostrategic Rationale

Myanmar has had a long history with China because of its long land border with China. China and Myanmar share a common border of 2,200 km (1367 miles) with easy access to each other's territory. Myanmar is not only a potential supply route bypassing the Malacca Strait, but also a strategic staging point for controlling access to Malacca Strait's western approaches.<sup>1</sup> Being an energy-hungry country for its development, China heavily depends on the Southeast Asia sea lanes for its energy supply from the Middle East and Africa. It is well understood that controlling Malacca Strait is a key strategic objective of China to the point of risking armed conflict with the regional states. Therefore, the Strait of Malacca has become the chokepoint of China for accessing of their essential energy security while nearly 60 percent of Chinese ships daily pass through the Strait of Malacca.<sup>2</sup> China has considered its serious strategic weakness of the Strait of Malacca and found out another alternative way to transport its energy and other commodities instead of passing through the Strait of Malacca. Myanmar and Pakistan are the most important countries for China to protect itself from the vulnerabilities of the Strait of Malacca.<sup>3</sup> Myanmar is the only country in Southeast Asia that shares a border with China and has access to the Indian Ocean.

China recently has constructed both oil and gas pipelines through Myanmar, connecting the western port city of Kyaukpyu and Kuming in Yunnan province. Port and Special Economic Zone development in Kyaukphyu will also serve Chinese strategic interest in Indian Oceans as it could be an undeclared China's maritime assets.<sup>4</sup> Access to Myanmar's ports and overland transportation routes through Myanmar is seen as a vital and strategic security asset for China. China would be able to shorten the distance by 3000 km by avoiding the Strait of Malacca to reach the Bay of Bengal.

China also has its dream to establish its influence in Indian oceans. "String of Pearls" is one of China's strategic ambitions for its commercial and support for its energy necessity along the sea routes which is monopolized by the United States navy.<sup>5</sup> Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Pakistan are targeted countries for the String of Pearls strategy for China. The term "string of pearls" was used by Booz Allen Hamilton who prepared a report of energy security for the US Department of Defense. According to China's "2015 Defense White paper", it emphasized that China adopted a new strategy that included "open seas protection" as China wanted to protect its overseas interests and properties. This string of pearls includes taking clockwise deep-sea port at Sonadia near Chittagong in Bangladesh, Kyaukphyu in Myanmar, Hambantota and Colombo in Sri Lanka, and the Karachi and Gwadar ports in

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<sup>1</sup>Tuli Sinha. *China-Myanmar Energy Engagements; Challenges and Opportunities* ( New Delhi: IPCS, December 2009 ) 1-4.

<sup>2</sup>Romano, Giulia C, and Jean-Francois Di Meglio. *China's Energy Security: A Multidimensional Perspective* (UK: Routledge, 2016 ) 61.

<sup>3</sup>J. Mohan Malik. "Myanmar's Role in China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative." *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 111 (2018)362-378

<sup>4</sup>Maung Aung Myoe. *Myanmar as a Geopolitical Pivot in Indo-Pacific Region* (Nay Pyi Taw, National Defense University, 2015 ) 241.

<sup>5</sup> J. Mohan Malik. "Myanmar's Role in China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27, no.111 (2018), 362-378.

Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> Among them, Kyaukphyu in Myanmar is a place for China oil pipeline to Yunnan and that is why it becomes an essential port in China's String of Pearls strategy.

Moreover, due to its strategic location to access the Indian Ocean, Myanmar is one of the China's important neighboring countries. Therefore, China planned to implement many projects with Myanmar under the banner of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI can be seen as the emerging geopolitical strategy of China in the 21st century. As part of the BRI, Myanmar and China signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to establish the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Against the backdrop of the China-Myanmar corridor, China wants to reduce its vulnerability of depending on the Strait of Malacca and improve its access to the Ocean water route for its landlocked provinces. China-Myanmar Economic Corridor is aimed to connect Kunming, China's Yunnan Province to Mandalay, Yangon, and Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) of Myanmar.

Locating in the western coast of Myanmar, Kyaukphyu port project is one of the major Chinese projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. China is prioritizing the construction of Kyaukphyu port because it is the terminus of oil pipeline and a parallel natural gas pipeline running to Kunming, capital of southwestern China's Yunnan Province. Building a deep-sea port at Kyaukphyu makes considerable economic and strategic sense for China for developing its landlocked provinces. Shipping goods from Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and India to Kyaukphyu and then overland to Yunnan will save thousands of miles and will reduce relying on the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea to ports along China's southern and eastern coasts and traveling overland to China's western provinces.<sup>2</sup> Implementing an economic corridor that connects China's western provinces to the Indian Ocean is Chinese main strategic interests in Myanmar. Therefore, peace and stability in Myanmar are essential for China.

#### **(d) Myanmar in India's Geostrategic Rationale**

Out of all ASEAN member states, Myanmar is the only country that has the connecting land border with India. India and Myanmar share a 1,643 km (1021 miles) long unfenced border. Myanmar has a long coastline that shares parts of the Bay of Bengal, in particular the surrounding areas of the Coco Islands and the Andaman Sea, which is important to India's strategic consideration. Some key factors that should foster India's proactive relation with Myanmar are as follows: first, as a Look East Policy initiative to reach out to ASEAN on the whole; second, to coordinate efforts with Myanmar to develop the Indian Northeast region by controlling insurgency and promoting economic growth and development; and lastly, to counter and control the growing Chinese influence in Myanmar to further ensure a balance of power in Asia.<sup>3</sup> Myanmar, with which India shares a long land border, is the most critical gateway to Southeast Asia. As part of India's "Look East" policy, this access could increase Myanmar's export market to India and develop the flow of Indian Manufactured goods to Myanmar and other Southeast Asia countries.

<sup>1</sup>Tom Miller. *China's Asian Dream: Empire Building along the New Silk Road* ( UK, Zed Books Ltd, 2017 ) 89.

<sup>2</sup>Gregory Poling. *China's Maritime Silk Road: Strategic and Economic Implication for the Indo-Pacific Region* ( Singapore: CSIS, 2018 ) 67.

<sup>3</sup>Tuli Sinha. *China-Myanmar Energy Engagements; Challenges and Opportunities* ( New Delhi: IPCS, December 2009 ) 1-4.

The economic cooperation between India's Northeast region and Southeast Asia is one of the main intentions of the Look East Policy. Accordingly, India has undertaken numerous bilateral and multilateral projects for boosting connectivity between its northeast provinces and Southeast Asia. The important ongoing and potential infrastructures projects in this regard are the Moreh-Kalewa Road, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Trans-Asian Highway, India-Myanmar rail linkages, the Kaladan Project, the Stilwell road, the Myanmar-India-Bandladesh gas or oil pipeline, the Tamanthi Hydroelectricity project and the optical fiber network between Northeast India and Southeast Asia which has been operational since 2009.<sup>1</sup> Infrastructure projects, such as the Trans-Asia Highway between Northeastern India and Bangkok passing through Myanmar are the key to opening new trading routes between India and the Southeast Asian neighbors. All those will lead not only to further bilateral cooperation and trade but will also open the Southeast Asian markets to Delhi and get India more involved in the Asian trade world.<sup>2</sup> Myanmar's role is pivotal for the development of India's Northeast region. India's investments in Myanmar's infrastructure are more fruitful for Northeast provinces as they can connect physically with the more prosperous markets of Southeast Asia.

Physically, four of India's six remote Northeastern provinces: Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh, between China and Myanmar, and are quite removed from direct contact with New Delhi. Among them, Arunachal Pradesh province is the most vulnerable and China is disputing Indian's claim to much of that remote state's territory. Since India's northeast is also known for geographical inaccessibility, insurgencies, and underdevelopment, cross-border relations with Myanmar could also improve New Delhi's access to and governance within these troubled states. India, like China, also desires more efficient overland routes through Myanmar to supply its northeastern security arms forces.<sup>3</sup> This could improve bilateral security cooperation between India and Myanmar and benefit both nations' internal security programs. Moreover, Myanmar is a potentially very important neighbor for India's energy security as it can be a very rich source of natural gas.

In 2001, India created the Andaman and Nicobar Command to safeguard India's strategic interest in Southeast Asia and the Strait of Malacca and introduced the rapid deployment of military assets in the region. There were several reasons for this creation, including India's greater interest in the Indian Ocean region, the buildup of the Indian Navy, and India's 'Look East' policy of the 1990s that focused on strengthening relations with Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup> Geographically, India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands are closer to Myanmar than to mainland India. Therefore, to improve maritime cooperation with Myanmar would enhance India's sea power projection and help India to check China's regional ambitions.

#### **(e) Myanmar in the Sino-Indian Competition: Pawn or Pivot?**

Presently, there seems to be a rivalry between India and China for Myanmar - from the tangibles of trade and investment to the intangibles of cooperation and support for their respective regional influence. Both countries are also anxious to tap Myanmar's huge oil and natural gas reserves and are also seeking access, through Myanmar, to the Indian Ocean to help open up their poor landlocked provinces in their southwest and northeast, respectively. A recent Chinese diplomatic initiative plan, the BRI, is a huge project and needed strong financial

<sup>1</sup>Shibashis Chatterjee. *The Look East Policy and India's Northeastern States* (Singapore: A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University, March 2014) 2-3.

<sup>2</sup>Tuli Sinha. *China-Myanmar Energy Engagements; Challenges and Opportunities* (New Delhi: IPCS, December 2009) 1-4.

<sup>3</sup>Willim E. Boswell. *Myanmar in Balance* (USA, US Army and War College, 2016) 54.

<sup>4</sup>Ranjit Gupta. "China, Myanmar and India: A Strategic Perspective", *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 8, no.1 (January 2013) 81.



support for its implementation. In the BRI, the main focal point is the infrastructural connectivity. With the infrastructural connectivity in the region, trade and investment will follow together. Connecting East Asia to West Europe by land and sea routes is the major objective of the BRI. Under the BRI, there are six major economic corridors and several key maritime pivot points. China has been implementing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CEPC) and it has planned to build a 3000 km network of roads, railway, and pipeline from Xinjiang to Pakistan port of Gwadar.<sup>1</sup> After finishing this project, China will get access to the Arabian Sea. To connect China with the South and Southeast Asian region, Myanmar plays an important role for its geopolitical location.

Given Myanmar's geographical location, India's strategic interests in the relationship with Myanmar include the protection of India's territorial integrity in the remote North-eastern part of India. India's six North-eastern states are sandwiched between Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, and Myanmar. Myanmar shares a 1643 km border with four of these six North-eastern states of India. These four states are the farthest away from India's heartland. On the other hand, China has an 1125 km border with Arunachal Pradesh, which is claimed as China's territory.<sup>2</sup> If Myanmar is under the strategic control of China, the protection of India's North-eastern states would be impossible for India. Moreover, economic growth and development of these four remote North-eastern states of India are mainly dependent on the full-scale economic cooperation with Myanmar.

Given Myanmar's long coastline on the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal and its proximity to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India's relationship with Myanmar acquires great importance in the context of the security of these islands as well as India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal. If China secures a pre-eminent position of influence in Myanmar, Myanmar could be used as the springboard for China's ambitions in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup> As it is evident from the above, amongst all the Southeast Asian neighbors, Myanmar is more important for India's geostrategic rationale and that is why Myanmar's domestic and foreign policies have the highest potential to directly impact India's strategic interests.

Since Myanmar is one of the pivot countries in Sino-Indian competition, it will harm Myanmar's national and domestic interests without preparing a sound plan in dealing with geostrategic players. If Myanmar cannot translate its geographic advantages into geopolitical values, Myanmar will become a pawn in the strategic competition among great powers in the Indo-Pacific region. For that reason, it is imperative to figure out whether Myanmar could achieve a proper balance in dealing with regional superpower countries, especially in its relations with China as China economically proves to be the largest investor for Myanmar.

Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone is one of the eight special economic zones in the master plan designed for the Myanmar development. The project is significant for China because Kyaukphyu port is the entry point of a China oil and gas pipeline which gives it an alternative route for energy imports from the Middle East that avoids the Malacca Straits. Myanmar and China agreed on the construction of a two-pipeline connection between Kyaukphyu of Myanmar and Kunming in the Yunnan Province of China. The oil pipeline was about 771 km long and the gas pipeline was long about 793 km, they pass through 21 townships across Myanmar and terminate in China's Yunnan Province. Its estimated cost of

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<sup>1</sup>Hnin Mu Lwin. *Myanmar's Geopolitical Significance and China's Belt and Road Initiative* (Japan: IUJ, 2019) 54.

<sup>2</sup>Ranjit Gupta. "China, Myanmar and India: A Strategic Perspective", *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 8, no.1 (January 2013) 81.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*, 84

construction was approximately US\$2.54 billion.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, implementing the Kyaukphyu project is a major challenge to Myanmar because it is huge and also a part of the Chinese BRI project. China is supposed to spend US\$ 10 billion on this project under the infrastructure of BRI because the Kyaukphyu project is its strategic special zone from where it can access the India Ocean. If Myanmar terminates the construction of the project, it will have to compensate China. If she steps forward the project, she will have to lend many billions from China with interest.<sup>2</sup> A country like Myanmar has difficulties to receive necessary credit from the other countries, so Myanmar unavoidably has to deal with China's credit system. China would be able to influence Myanmar's actions to some extent as a big lender.

Besides, Myanmar's economic development is deterred by its poor infrastructure, which can be reinforced by FDI. Myanmar needs to attract more and more FDI for infrastructure investments. In this regard, China stands as a vital actor since China was the second biggest foreign investment holder in Myanmar until 2016, and is presently the biggest one. Chinese FDI in Myanmar is focused on extractive industries and the energy sector.<sup>3</sup> Large-Scale Chinese FDI projects have relied on expropriating land, displacing local agricultural populations, aggravating social polarization, and even causing political instability. One notable example is the Letpadaung-Taung copper mining project, which forced the eviction of locals without due process or adequate compensation, worsening the human rights conditions of ethnic minorities and farmers residing near mine.<sup>4</sup> There is no doubt that Myanmar's economy is now heavily dependent on economic ties with China. Due to the more extensive growing Chinese influence over Myanmar, it is likely that Myanmar will become a strategic satellite base for China.

On the other hand, Myanmar is important for India not only for much-needed natural gas but for physical connectivity with the ASEAN economies. Myanmar's role is pivotal if India's northeast states want to benefit from the Look East Policy (LEP). It was conceived with three specific objectives. In the first place, it was designed to end India's self-imposed economy and integrate with the developing economies of Southeast Asia. In the second phase, the LEP assumed an increasingly strategic thrust, with India becoming keenly aware of the need to balance against intrusive Chinese designs in the region. The third phase of the LEP is to improve India's ties with ASEAN countries so that India can access the more productive economies of Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> However, the LEP has not yet produced the desired result. The continuing political instability in India's Northeast regions also hinders the possibility of Indian policymakers using the area as an immediate gateway to Myanmar and the rest of Southeast Asia. As long as the political turmoil lingers in the Northeast, India cannot expect to use its eastern frontier to benefit from any economic opening up with Myanmar without significant security concerns and challenges.<sup>6</sup> Tensions exist between these states and the central

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<sup>1</sup>“Myanmar-China oil and natural Gas pipeline project: Assessing Transparency and Accountability with regard to Social Impacts of the Affected Local population”, *Myanmar China Pipeline Watch Committee (MCPWC)*, January 8, 2016, 22.

<sup>2</sup>Hnin Wai Lwin Oo. *A Political economy Approach towards Myanmar-China relationship* (Japan, IUJ ) 55-6.

<sup>3</sup>“Info graphic: 30 Years of Chinese Investment in Myanmar”, *The Arrawaddy*, January 2018, 1.

<sup>4</sup>Jonathan T. Chow. *Upgrading Myanmar-China relation to International Standards* ( South Korea: Asian Institute for Policy Studies, 2015 ) 12.

<sup>5</sup>Shibashis Chatterjee. *The Look East Policy and India's Northeastern States* ( Singapore, A Graduate School of Nan yang Technological University, March 2014 ) 41.

<sup>6</sup>Renaud Egret. “India's Ambitions in Burma: More Frustration than Success?” *Asian Survey* 48, no.6 (2008), 957.

government as well as amongst their native indigenous people and migrants from other parts of India and illegal immigrants.

As a country that faces (Northeastern) Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea in the Indian Ocean, Myanmar is positioned to play an important role in the Indo-Pacific region. Myanmar's natural resources, on land and in the sea including Economic Zone and its geographic location are assets for her to be a geopolitical pivot. According to Zbigniew Brzezinski's concepts, there are four major powers in the Indo-Pacific region, namely, the United States, China, Russia, and India. Among them, China and India are regional major powers, which could be considered as "geostrategic players". China is the most ambitious geostrategic player with a great interest in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in establishing its influence in the Indian Ocean once its dominance is ensured in the (west) Pacific Ocean. Being an energy-hungry country for its development, China heavily depends on the Southeast Asia sea lanes for its energy supply from the Middle East and Africa. It makes China vulnerable to choke points, such as the Malacca Strait. China builds some oil and gas pipelines that bypass the critical part of Southeast Asia waters. China has recently constructed both oil and gas pipelines through Myanmar, connecting the western port city of Kyaukpheung and Kunming in Yunnan province. Port and Special Economic Zone development in Kyaukpheung will also serve Chinese strategic interest in Indian Oceans as it could be an undeclared China's maritime assets.

As for India, in the context of geopolitical competition, growing Chinese influence and presence in Myanmar have undermined its strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Myanmar is the only land bridge between India and the ASEAN countries. Indian policymakers must consider India's Northeast region to be the beginning of Southeast Asia and therefore, Myanmar has a pivotal role and importance if India's "Look East Policy" is to be truly meaningful.<sup>1</sup> Bringing all these factors together, it can be concluded that Myanmar's geostrategic position is a "geopolitical pivot" in the Indo-Pacific region. However, it is essential for Myanmar to have the capability to change its geographic advantages into geopolitical value. What is important for Myanmar is to take the best advantage of its geographic location.

Unfortunately, Myanmar seems to be unable to use its geographic advantages. A factor is Myanmar cannot deal with the Chinese economic influence. The rising China has influenced its neighboring countries economically. For example, China gives loans and grants as official development aids to OECD countries for their economic development. China's FDI projects in energy and extractive industries have also been degraded the local environment, deplete natural resources, and harm resident's livelihood. Then again, India is not viewed as a credible balancer against China because the LEP is not yet on firm footing with its immediate neighbor – Myanmar- in the Northeast. Bringing all these factors together, Myanmar may become the pawn of China's strategic interests although she may be a pivot country.

### **Conclusion**

According to the theory, geopolitical pivots are the states whose importance is derived not from their power and motivation but rather their sensitive location and from the consequences of their potentially vulnerable condition for the behavior of geostrategic players. Myanmar's natural resources, on land and in sea- including Economic Zone, and its geographic location are assets for her to be a geopolitical pivot. However, so far, Myanmar was

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<sup>1</sup>Ranjit Gupta. "China, Myanmar and India: A Strategic Perspective", *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 8, no.1 (January 2013)81.

not able to use this position of being a geopolitical pivot for her advantage. Myanmar needs to adopt efficient and clever foreign and security policies to tackle the Sino-Indian competition in the Indo-pacific region for her benefit.

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