



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

Title:	INDIA-MYANMAR DEFENCE COOPERATION
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In recent times, the rising strategic relevance of Myanmar in Southeast Asian cross-border diplomacy has not gone unnoticed by India. The shift in foreign policy rhetoric of India from 'Look East' to 'Act East' is a case in point. Myanmar has been for long a strategic wedge and economic importance for India. Unfortunately, the bilateral relations between India and Myanmar have politically faced ups and downs challenged by insurgencies and the presence of China. Despite the pressures in the relations, the defence cooperation between India and Myanmar has been in an upward trend since 1990s. With India striving towards indigenization, Myanmar has emerged as an asset.

One of the earliest events of bilateral defence relations was the sale of six British Dakota planes by India to Myanmar, in the wake of the Myanmar civil war of 1949.

During the Indo-China war and Burmese military coup of 1962, Myanmar's neutral stand in the war and inward-looking economic reforms, retreated the country back into a shell. During this period Myanmar also adopted isolationist policies. Due to these developments, India moved away from Myanmar.

The hiatus continued till the inception of India's Look East Policy of 1992. With the opening up of Indian economy and an eye on the rising economies of Southeast Asia, New

Delhi re-aligned its focus on Myanmar which emerged as an important peg in the foreign policy of India for the following reasons:

- Myanmar serves as India's doorway to tap the regional resource potential.
- The crucial common maritime boundary along the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea is strategically important for India.
- The internal instability of Myanmar and border issues- an extra-regional factor has called for deeper defence ties
- The indomitable presence of China in the Indo-Myanmar strategic calculus is another major cause of concern
- With the initiation of democratization process in Myanmar, there was discernible thawing of ties in the first decade of 21st century

The most integral part of defence engagement has taken place in the naval sphere. India, with an aim to expand its 'Blue Water' naval strategy is increasingly involved in modernising and training Myanmar Navy, equipping it with state-of-the-art technology. For instance, in 2003, the first ever joint naval exercise was conducted between the two nations. In 2013, there was the port call by Myanmar Navy flotilla to Vishakhapatnam and was succeeded by coordinated patrols by both the Navies along the maritime border between India's Landfall Island and Myanmar's Coco Islands. Again in 2013, India sold its indigenously built sonar and radar technologies to Myanmar for the two Indian Scorpene-class submarines.

Other defence cooperation activities include the supply of Indian military hardware and technology, training of Myanmar Army in Indian defence establishments, intelligence sharing for joint counter-insurgency operations along the land border and border cooperation agreements, amidst the high-profile governmental and defence level visits to pursue security dialogues.

As regards the challenges in the defence cooperation between the two countries:

National security in both the states is a major impediment due to cross-border illicit activities like drugs and arms smuggling, human trafficking, apart from the activities carried out by the insurgents.

China's ever increasing economic and military might, assertiveness in India's maritime frontiers and shadowing presence in Myanmar's Coco islands (electronic surveillance systems) remains yet another concern.

Indian initiatives can play a key role in not only enhancing the bilateral relations between the two countries but also defence cooperation given India's drive towards indigenisation. Not treading the old path, India should not let Myanmar slip into isolation or Chinese beneficence. Military ties, defence investment and preparedness are essential for securing India's national interests and goals in Myanmar.

However, the key argument here would be whether closer ties with Myanmar will bridge India to Southeast Asian resources and geopolitics, and will Myanmar emerge as an important ally for India in channelizing its growing aspiration in Southeast Asia?
