

# Sino-Myanmar Military Cooperation and its Implications for India

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*China is emerging as the closest strategic partner of Myanmar. This has been advanced by politico-military assistance followed by economic and energy cooperation. Besides, Myanmar is becoming strategically significant for India for strengthening its economic links with South East Asia; for acquiring energy resources and from the security perspective. The Sino-Myanmar military cooperation which started with the negotiation of purchase of arms including jet fighters, armoured vehicles and naval vessels has gone much deeper. It has brought the Chinese to India's eastern flank with the upgradation of infrastructure like dams, bridges, roads and ports as well as electronic-intelligence and maritime reconnaissance facilities. Further, the Sino-Myanmar military cooperation designed to achieve their objective of extending their military capability up to the Indian Ocean. This poses an acute security threat for India and South Asia in general. Nevertheless, since the Chinese influence has come to dominate the politico-military functioning of Myanmar, the country is looking to balance China by enhancing economic cooperation with India and other regional formations.*

## Introduction

China is the fastest growing economy of the world with an average 10 per cent growth rate over the past 30 years. Its current objective is to secure its energy supplies. This has prompted the Chinese to enter into strategic cooperation with the resource rich countries of the world including its immediate neighbour Myanmar. Subsequently, the People's Republic of China is emerging as the nearest strategic partner of Republic of the Union of Myanmar in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the same time, the booming energy cooperation between the two countries is advanced by military assistance. The Chinese are securing their lines of transit connectivity into the Bay of Bengal to gain access to the Indian Ocean.<sup>1</sup> This process has been initiated by its strategic military support to Myanmar over the last decade. China supported Myanmar when the United Nations imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions and the United States declared it, a rogue state along with other countries like Sudan, Iran and North Korea. In due course of time the Chinese have steadily got involved in over 62 projects including hydro, oil, gas and mining in Myanmar.<sup>2</sup>

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This research paper intends to analyse and examine the extent of strategic military cooperation between China and Myanmar which will enable an assessment of the possible security threat to India.

## **Background**

Myanmar –then Burma- was the first non-communist country to recognise the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Border disputes between the two countries were settled amicably and Myanmar supported the “One-China policy”. They strictly followed the policy of peaceful co-existence till 1967, when the Cultural Revolution in China led to anti-Chinese riots in Yangon.<sup>3</sup> However, the situation improved between 1971 and 1988 gradually leading to a partnership in strategic affairs. Since the military junta took over in 1988, Myanmar has assumed greater significance in the Asia-Pacific strategic environment.<sup>4</sup> This was reinforced by the high volume of Chinese arms sale to the junta, as well as by mythical reports of military bases and a probable nuclear weapons programme.

Since 1988, the capability of the Tatmadaw, the Myanmar armed forces, has been vastly enhanced with the assistance of the China’s PLA (People’s Liberation Army).<sup>5</sup> The Chinese had supplied arms amounting to \$1 to 2 billion in the early 1990s followed by another \$400 million worth of arms in 1994. The PLA was also engaged in the training of Myanmar military personnel. Seats were reserved for Tatmadaw officers in Chinese Defence Staff Colleges.<sup>6</sup>

There have also been increasing economic and diplomatic exchanges between the two countries. Today, China is Myanmar’s third largest trading partner and investor after Thailand and Singapore.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of March 2011, the civilian government was sworn in under the new president Thein Sein, who is the leader of the Union Solidarity and Development Party<sup>8</sup>. He was also the Prime Minister during the previous State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) regime. Interestingly, therefore, though the regime has changed, the leadership remains the same. The Tatmadaw also depended on China for diplomatic protection against international efforts to punish the former junta for its political intransigence. Notwithstanding the endless calls from the international community to release Aung San Suu Kyi and enter into meaningful political dialogue with her and the National League for Democracy (NLD), the junta had not paid any heed. The Chinese despite having the potential to oblige the SPDC to agree to international demands, had helped the later in attainment of a core SPDC nationalist political-security objective.<sup>9</sup> As a result, China wields a great deal of influence in Myanmar. This is critical for India as both China and India are competing for strategic energy resources particularly for natural gas in Myanmar.

### **Strategic Significance of Myanmar from the Indian Perspective**

Since the formulation of its Look East Policy in the early 1990s, India has realised the significance of Myanmar in strengthening its economic links with South East Asia. The official visit paid by J.N. Dixit, the then foreign secretary to Yangon in March 1993 was a turning point in Indo-Myanmar relations when India decided to change its policy and cautiously engage the junta.<sup>10</sup> Myanmar is India's gateway to the ASEAN as it is the only member of the regional formation which shares a land and maritime boundary with India.<sup>11</sup> With India becoming a summit level partner of ASEAN and a member of the East Asia Summit, good bilateral relations with Myanmar will benefit India's national interests. Besides, Myanmar and India are members of sub-regional groupings such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMST-EC) and the Mekong Ganga Cooperation. It is also part of the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) and the Greater Mekong Sub-region Programme (GMS).

Geographically, Myanmar is located at the tri junction of South Asia, South East Asia and East Asia. It could be considered the transitional area (spot) of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC); Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and East Asia Economic Cooperation (EAEC). The significance of the country was highlighted by the 2004 ASEAN countries car rally from Guwahati (Assam) to Bangkok through Myanmar.<sup>12</sup> Myanmar is the second largest nation amongst the Indian neighbours, the largest on its eastern flank that can provide the eastern littoral areas an access up to the Bay of Bengal Sea.

Resource wise, Myanmar has the world's tenth biggest gas reserves estimated to be more than 90 trillion cubic feet. India's Oil and Natural Gas Cooperation (ONGC) Videsh Limited (OVL) and Gas Authority of India Limited (GAIL) hold a 30 per cent stake in the exploration and production of gas in Myanmar's A1 and A3 off shore blocks located in the Sittwe area of Arakan state.<sup>13</sup> A pipeline connecting the region with the Indian mainland is sure to ease the scarcity of gas in India. It was proposed to lay a pipeline for transportation of gas along the Bangladesh coastal region to enter India from the Irrawaddy region of Myanmar but could not be implemented because of the unreasonable demands made by Bangladesh. As an alternative, plans to bring the gas through a much longer 1575 km pipeline, from Sittwe port in Myanmar via Aizwal-Silchar-Guahawti-Siliguri to Gaya linking up with the Haldia-Jagadishpur oil pipeline in Gaya (Bihar) was proposed.<sup>14</sup>

Myanmar also poses a security concern for India. The political instability in Myanmar has linkages with the unrest in the India's Northeast. Various insurgent groups of the Northeast including the National Socialist Council of Nagaland

(NSCN), United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), United National Liberation Front (UNLF) etc have their camps across the border in the Kachin and Sagaing provinces of Myanmar. It is estimated that about 40 militant camps belonging to various Northeast militant groups exist on Myanmar soil.<sup>15</sup> Besides, there is increasing trafficking of drugs along the border with far reaching security impacts. The Northeastern states of India have strong cross border socio-cultural affinities - the outcome of a long historical process of intermingling amongst the people of the region.<sup>16</sup> As a reason, insurgency movement in Northeast has strong connections with the unrest in Myanmar. The Kuki-Chin groups who migrated from Myanmar in the last century are settled along the border area. Even, the NSCN faction of Kaplang has its origins in Myanmar. The porous border between India and Myanmar along the uneven terrain, are the main factors for that hamper Indian security operations to counter them. The role of non-state actors from Myanmar in the supply of arms to rebels in the Northeast became so serious that in 1995, the Indian and Myanmar armies conducted a joint operation- Operation Golden Bird - along the Indo-Myanmar border in which at least 40 insurgents were killed.<sup>17</sup> However, the operation received a set back due to India's support for the movement for democracy in Myanmar.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, China and India are openly competing for Myanmar's favour for strengthening their strategic interests in the north east areas of Indian Ocean. China wishes to protect its southern flank from possible future Indian threats and requires access to the sea for transportation of goods from its land-locked southern provinces. At the same time, India is looking an inland transportation route for the land locked states of the northeastern region through the Kaladan river that flows from Myanmar into Mizoram and further southwards into the Bay of Bengal.<sup>19</sup> Besides, India fears encirclement by China due to its influence with Myanmar and Pakistan. This strategic competition also worries the members of ASEAN, who are much concerned that a weak and vulnerable country like Myanmar will fall into Beijing's orbit and become a Chinese pawn in the region.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, China's bilateral relation with Myanmar is being further strengthened with the supply of arms, logistic equipment and infrastructure development that is primarily meant for military purposes.

### **Sino-Myanmar Military Cooperation**

China has been the major supplier of military hardware to Myanmar since the former junta regime had crushed a pro-democracy uprising in 1988.<sup>21</sup> It is estimated that about 90 per cent of the Myanmar military transportation is supplied by China alone.<sup>22</sup>

The Tatmadaw's cooperation with the PLA of China has become much closer in recent years. It started with the visit of a Chinese military delegation to Myanmar in 1989 to negotiate the purchase of arms including jet fighters, armoured vehicles and naval vessels. China exported military equipment worth of \$1.4 billion to Myanmar in 1993, including light and medium tanks, armoured personnel carriers (APC), F-7 jet fighters, Hainan class patrol vessels, arms and ammunition.<sup>23</sup> China has also trained the Myanmar army and the air force personnel. In December 1994, Li Peng and General Than Shee of Myanmar during their visit to China have brought huge military hardware (worth \$400 million) including made F-7 jet fighters, naval patrol boats, tanks, armed personal carriers, light arms, anti-aircraft guns and missiles, ammunition, logistic and transportation military equipments.<sup>24</sup>

Later, in October 1996, the Myanmar army chief, General Maung Aye visited China to discuss military and intelligence cooperation between the two countries.<sup>25</sup> During the mid-1990s, the Myanmar regime allowed Chinese intelligence services access to Zedetkyi Kyun Island, located off the coast of Myanmar's southernmost tip, Kawthaung or Victoria Point.<sup>26</sup> China has also helped Myanmar to develop infrastructure such as dams, bridges, roads and ports including the strategic road along the Irrawaddy River trade route linking Yunnan province to the Bay of Bengal. The Chinese are also attempting to secure the supply of natural gas and oil reserves from the coastal areas. A railroad through Kunming via Dali in China links up with the traditional Mandalay-Rangoon railways as part of the Irrawaddy. Besides, several Myanmar coastal points including the harbors built by the Chinese at Kyaukypu and Thilawa and other vantage locations have strategic assets to both India and China. Significantly 80 percent of the Chinese imported oil passes through the Strait of Malacca.<sup>27</sup> It has been the reason for infrastructural development in Myanmar which had increased after 1988 primarily in terms of transportation network linked with the China.

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Chinese military aid to Myanmar has escalated. In 2002, China sent 200 military trucks and 5 new warships. In the following years between 2002 and 2004, China trained Tatmadaw naval officers and conducted joint naval exercises along Myanmar's southern coast. In 2005 alone, China sold 400 military trucks to Myanmar, bringing the total sales of trucks to 1,500.<sup>28</sup> Later, in October 2008, Myanmar and China stepped up military cooperation after Myanmar's top three generals met with Gen Zhang Li, the vice chief-of-staff of China's PLA, in Naypyidaw.

In addition to the selling of weapons to Myanmar, China is also building infrastructure to benefit both the countries. They have built a triangle-shaped series of four naval

bases connecting Coco Island, Haigyi island, Mergui and Thilawa. Coco Island which is located just 40 km from the Landfall Islands in the northern most part of the Andamans has been of most concern to India.<sup>29</sup> Chinese security agencies are suspected to be conducting electronic-intelligence and maritime reconnaissance from here since 1994. The islands are fully equipped with radars, antenna towers and other electronic equipments, installing comprehensive signals intelligence (SIGINT) collecting facility.<sup>30</sup> The Haigyi island lies at the mouth of the Bassain river, while Mergui is a Tennasserin coastal town. The Thilawa is the gateway from Yangon to the Andaman Sea.

The Tatmadaw air force is essentially equipped with Chinese MiG-21 (60 J-7s) and MiG-19 (12 J-6 and 36 Q-5) variants. In 2009, Myanmar placed orders for 50 K-8 Karakorums, a joint venture between China and Pakistan and the JL-8 jet trainers and light attack aircrafts. The Myanmar navy has also received a variety of small platforms and missiles(C-801).<sup>31</sup>

The most significant arms agreement between China and Myanmar has been the China's North Industries Corporation (NORINCO) signing a copper mining contract with Myanmar in June 2010.<sup>32</sup> NORINCO is the largest arms manufacturing wing of the PLA. Nevertheless, the NORINCO website has noted that the project serves the dual purposes of strengthening the strategic reserves of copper resources in China and enhancement of their influence in Myanmar.

In August 2010, the Chinese PLAN (PLA-Navy) conducted a joint exercise with the Tatmadaw navy. Two PLA's warships the *Guangzhou* and *Chaohu* of the fifth Escort Task Group came to the Thilawa port near Yangon as they were returning from counter-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean region. Notably, it was the first Chinese naval warships visit to Myanmar with the objective of enhancing their military capability in the Bay of Bengal Sea.<sup>33</sup> Later, in September 2010, when Gen Than Shwe of Myanmar visited to Beijing, a senior Chinese military officials called for further strengthening the military cooperation between the two nations. Further, the deepening military ties between China and Myanmar was exposed when the Vice Chairman of China's Military Commission, Xu Caihou arrived at Naypyidaw on 13 May 2011 on four-day visit at the invitation of General Min Aung Hlaingm, Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar Defence Services, and met the president U Thein Sein wherein the cooperation extended by China on the military affairs was appreciated by the later.<sup>34</sup>

### **Reassessing Chinese Military Capability Enhancement**

While analysing the threat perception from a country, it is obligatory to consider the intentions and capabilities of the adversary. Generally, intentions have the flexibility to manoeuvre the best out of the prevailing environment. This is why it is difficult to interpret the specific strategy of a country. But, the capability of a country is built with precise objectives since transformation in military technology entails heavy costs for building the fighting capability of any armed forces. As a reason, the capability factor remains a primary element in understanding the strategy of a nation. Consequently, the evolving Chinese military capability needs to be studied to determine the strategic design of China in its relationship with Myanmar.

The Chinese strategic behaviour is guided by its national interests, defined in terms of survival, security, power and relative capacities. China perceives India to be an inferior power, which is desirous of dominating South Asia, South East Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Hence, India is perceived as a potential challenger to China's pre-dominant position in Asia, particularly if it aligns itself with the US.<sup>35</sup> It tries to make use of US calculus to outbid India in the regional influence and simultaneously aims to contain India through a mix of cooperation and coercion. Hence, it wants to build up infrastructure, military capabilities and relationships with India's neighbours, like Myanmar, to contain India and to develop credible flexibility in the use of force.

Besides, China's military strategy has been in a constant state of evolution. They are developing doctrines and carrying out reforms to fight high-intensity wars of short duration in which the strengths of all its armed forces are synergised in the most optimal manner for the specific mission. Its strategy and doctrine have clearly outlined the tenets for application of force at the time of its own choosing and exploiting weaknesses of the enemy. Central to this objective has been the RMA (Revolution in Military Affairs) with Chinese characteristics. China has also made progress in its up-gradation of air and space warfare capabilities.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, both India and China's relative geo-political and geo-strategic position has a major influence on the regional security environment. China would always be wary of India control of Indian Ocean Region and its potential to fuel conflict in Tibet. As a reaction to it, China is enhancing its influence in Myanmar. Therefore, India needs to treat the Chinese strategy of encirclement especially through Myanmar as a threat and monitor Chinese military capability enhancement through strategic ties.

## **Analysis**

The study on Sino-Myanmar military cooperation determines the following significant observations that are discussed below

First, the military cooperation between China and Myanmar has not only gone much deeper by 21<sup>st</sup> Century but have also entered into a coordinated understanding of each others convenience in achieving their respective objectives. Hence, in case of future conflict with any of these two countries they are likely to response in an allied manner. At the same time the chances of any military conflict between them is made obsolete. This emerging security environment could be a disadvantage for country like India in securing its eastern flanks and critical in acquiring resources like natural gas and hydrocarbons from Myanmar, primarily while competing with China.

Second, since, most of the military weapon systems of the Tatmadaw are acquired from China; the technical threshold of the Tatmadaw troops to fight a war or conflict has become dependent on the Chinese as maintenance of any High-Tech weapon systems requires a perennial supply of wide range of accessories including spare parts. It is expected to remain the same in the near future too. Though the Tatmadaw have started looking towards other countries like India, Ukraine, North Korea and Thailand for acquisition of weapons, the comparative procurement of arms to that of China remains minimal. Things are even considered to have changed much after the discovery of natural gas fields off the Burmese coast and are looking for arms deals with Russia in their efforts to balance Chinese's influence in their foreign policy. However, the deeper strategic military coordination of Myanmar and China will prolong Myanmar to comply with the strategic designs of China.

Third, the up-gradations of infrastructure like ports and harbors in Myanmar by China are likely to be used as potential support bases for Chinese warships and submarines intended to dominate the Straits of Malacca, and in controlling the SLOC (Sea Line of Communication) through the Indian Ocean to the Middle East. This is similar in case of new airfields which has undergone transformation in recent years. Considering the Chinese military transformation along with its new doctrine to fight offensive high-intensity wars of short duration, the intelligence links between Naypyidaw and Beijing is a long-term game plan of China in establishing bases for future course of offensive operations. Auxiliary, the Chinese are determined in gradually expanding and establishing a permanent military presence in the Indian Ocean region.

Fourth, since the Chinese influence in Myanmar has dominated the politico-military functionaries of Myanmar, the latter is looking for alternatives in balancing China by enhancing economic cooperation with the regional organizations.

## Conclusion

In view of the fact that the Sino-Myanmar military cooperation is bringing the China's PLA along the eastern flank of India, India's strategic engagement with China is becoming sensitive. While India's look east policy is yet to be materialized on the ground with major hurdles of clearing insurgency and negotiating the rough hilly terrain of the northeast in constructing road infrastructure, the increasing Sino-Myanmar military cooperation is adding new front to the challenges of India. Nonetheless, through Myanmar, the Chinese strategic advancement of extending their influence upto the Indian Ocean is about to show up their force presence on the pretext of securing the Strait of Malacca from piracy. It is likely to be a crucial factor in determining stability in the South-Asian region. The arrival of the China's military presence in the Bay of Bengal Sea is also going to militarize the region. Taking into account the Sino-Pakistan military nexus along the west, the much projected threat perception of China encircling India is turning out to be a reality. The emerging security environment is also compelling India to strengthen its military capability. At the same time India needs to explore the option of enhancing bilateral and multi-lateral cooperation with the smaller neighbouring countries.

While China is far ahead of India in engaging Myanmar through military and economic cooperation, India has still got the option of enhancing its economic cooperation with Myanmar. Moreover, Myanmar's venture for regional economic cooperation and military procurement beyond China should be used by India for taking the dual advantage of securing energy resources and strengthening geo-strategic cooperation in countering Chinese influence. This will depend on how India counters the emerging military threat and maintains a balance in engaging China both on the western and eastern flanks. 

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