



ISSUE BRIEF

No. 134

April 2018

Strategic Importance of Myanmar its Relevance to Countries and the Contests



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Strategic Importance of Myanmar's Location

A Southeast Asian country, Myanmar borders China on the north and north-east, Laos and Thailand on the east and south-east, the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal in the south, with Bangladesh and India on its west. The Andaman sea and the Bay of Bengal provide access to the world's major shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean. It shares 1338 km of its borders with four north-eastern states of India, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur. Located in the backyard of China's Yunnan Province, Myanmar is the only ASEAN country that has its borders with India. Myanmar is India's gateway to South East Asia and provides connectivity to realise India's 'Act East' policy.

With the country upgrading 36 of its north-south and 45 east-west roads to fashion a national network of highways, besides creating three cross-border transport corridors linking Thailand, China, Cambodia, Vietnam and India's north-east, Myanmar is developing into a transportation hub in the region.

Key Points

1. The deep sea port of Kyaukpyu in the Rakhine State provides access to the Indian Ocean and is the entry point for China's oil and gas imports from the Middle East, which is transported to its Yunnan province through a pipeline called Shwe pipeline. The port is a part of its ambitious 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative and maybe converted into a naval base.
2. With increased investment in Myanmar, China appears to have realised the imperatives of a relatively stable and peaceful Myanmar.
3. Myanmar is India's gateway to South East Asia and provides connectivity to realise its 'Act East' policy.
4. In Myanmar, India's concerns relate to the Chinese-aided and supported armed ethnic groups, arming and providing a safe haven to India's north-east-based militant groups. The security of investments, construction and operation of its infrastructure projects in Myanmar is yet another area of its unease.
5. Saudi Arabia has shown interest in Myanmar by funding Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the armed group involved in recent clashes in the Rakhine State.
6. The United States may like to reign in the Chinese influence in Myanmar besides being able realise its geopolitical ambitions.
7. Deprivation of citizenship status to the Rohingyas and their forced displacement from areas close to the areas of interests of major powers cannot be without interests and intent of one party or the other.

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an autonomous think-tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflict and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

Strategic Importance of Myanmar its ...

China's Strategic Interests in Myanmar

China sees Myanmar as a doorway to the Indian Ocean region that can provide access to an alternate route for its oil and gas imports besides being a source of hydrocarbon resources for its energy needs. China's China International Trust Investment Corporation (CITIC), a state-owned investment company has invested 85 percent of \$7.3 billion cost in the Kyaukpyu deep sea port project with a capacity of 7.8 million tons of bulk cargo in the Western Rakhine State¹. They are also developing a \$10 billion Kyaukpyu special economic zone² (SEZ) in the Ramree Island. CITIC will have the right to operate the port for 50 years with the prospect of an extension for 25 years,³ which gives China tremendous advantage in maintaining its pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean. Once completed, the port can be converted into a military base. A \$3.2 billion industrial park will also be built by CITIC in the area⁴. The port is the entry point for all oil and gas that China imports from the Middle East which is transported to China's Yunnan province through a pipeline called the Shwe pipeline. The Shwe natural gas and oil pipelines to China, which became operational in October 2013 and August 2014, respectively, would end the US' capability to impose a blockade on China's oil supply, a major strategic debit. The sea port enables China to avoid Malacca Straits, a congested choke point.

Beijing has been pushing for favoured access to the deep sea port of Kyaukpyu in the Bay of Bengal, as part of its ambitious 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) infrastructure project to deepen its links with the economies of the region.

Chinese Support to Ethnic Armed Insurgent Groups

In 1968, armed insurgents from the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), supported by thousands of Chinese, crossed the Sino-Myanmar border in the north-east and established a 20,000 km² stronghold⁵. Today, that area is controlled by the United Wa State Army (UWSA). The currency used in the UWSA's area is the Chinese Yuan and mobile telephones are connected to the Chinese network⁶. UWSA receives extensive material and political support including

sophisticated arms from Beijing. China has taken advantage of the Myanmar army, Tatmadaw's difficulties, in maintaining its forces in the North-eastern Shan and Kachin States. Though Tatmadaw has over 300,000 troops, its rapid reaction troops such as the 'Fire Brigade' are overstretched and have suffered casualties in confronting the rebels. By effectively supporting and arming the rebels, China has successfully reduced Tatmadaw's effectiveness, thus diminishing the government's control in these areas.

China's support to UWSA was also meant to ward off any western influence especially after Myanmar's military was forced to loosen its grip over the country consequently to the reforms in the country that took off in 2011. Beijing also felt the necessity to protect its investments in Myanmar. The latter concern became important after President Thein Sein's government decided to suspend the \$3.6 billion Myitsone hydroelectric dam project in the Kachin State in September 2011 after massive protests by the locals. Protests against a copper mine project in Letpadaung, which is a joint venture between the Chinese Wanbao Mining Copper company and the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings, is yet another area of the Chinese unease. UWSA has maintained ceasefire with the government for years, but has acted as Chinese conduit to provide military equipment and support to six of its allies⁷, the active, armed insurgent groups in the area. It is estimated that these seven groups account for 80 percent⁸ of all armed bands operating in Myanmar.

China had allowed the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), also known as the Kokang Army, which is a communist-inspired armed insurgent group, the use of its territory to outflank the Tatmadaw and has also permitted the rebel group to open a bank account in Beijing to collect and route donations from the public.

China has expanded the scope of its support and supply of illegal arms beyond Myanmar's borders to the insurgent groups in India's north-east through Myanmar-based separatist groups, which provides them deniability. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) which receives support through the Chinese

officials in the Yunnan province, some of whom are positioned in the Kachin and Sagaing areas of Myanmar, has backed and provided arms to the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Khaplang (NSCN-K), besides making available to them training ground and safe haven in Myanmar's territory.

Security Situation in Myanmar

Tatmadaw has been facing a serious security situation in the Rakhine State ever since the rebel Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), armed with knives and home-made bombs, launched a predawn attack on 20 police posts in the northern Rakhine state on August 25, 2017, killing 71 people including 12 security forces⁹. A large number of Rohingya civilians then started fleeing across the border into Bangladesh¹⁰. The attacks led to security operations in the Muslim townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung. While the military says it is fighting insurgents, the refugees say that the Rakhine Buddhists and the army are conducting a war to drive them out¹¹. Any further fighting in the area would preclude all prospects of repatriation of over 700,000 Rohingya refugees back to Myanmar.

Added to that, the Tatmadaw is facing far more serious threats from yet another well-trained and armed Northern Kachin State-based Buddhist insurgent group, the Arakan Army (AA), raised in 2009 under the Kachin Independent Army (KIA). Since 2015, the group has been establishing its base in the rugged hill country of Paletwa. The strategically-important town lies in the south of neighbouring Chin state and borders Bangladesh to the west and Rakhine State to the south. A member of the powerful northern ethnic bloc, the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), has been receiving arms and sophisticated weapon systems from UWSA. The group has approximately a 500 strong force in the Chin – Rakhine front, with the balance in the north and has been able to creep into the townships of Kyawktaw, Mrauk-U, Minbya and Ponnagyun, close to the state capital of Sittwe. From Paletwa and Kyawktaw, the AA has also infiltrated the west into the majority of Rohingya townships of Buthidaung and Rathedaung.

On August 22, 2017, the AA overran a base of the Arakan Liberation Army (ALA), an insignificant force militarily, the armed wing of the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP). The ALP in 2012 had signed a bilateral ceasefire with the Tatmadaw and signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015, which was not to the liking of the other armed ethnic groups. On August 31, 2017, the AA attacked a Tatmadaw unit in the area. According to media reports, army vessels moving along the Kaladan River were ambushed by the AA, killing 11 men, including 2 officers and wounding 14. Kaladan, a river which flows south from Indian borders through Chin and Rakhine State forms the key communication artery in an otherwise rugged terrain with few roads.

In early November 2017, the Military Operations Command 9 of the Myanmar Army launched an offensive in the Paletwa region, reportedly, supported by artillery and attack helicopters to clear the AA Base. Significantly, the military's media arm released no statements claiming success of the operations. On November 18, a clash between AA and the military took place in Buthidaung, one of the Muslim majority areas that had been targeted in the Tatmadaw's "clearance operations" against ARSA. In the event of Rohingya refugees being repatriated back to the Rakhine State, the ARSA and the AA are likely to interfere with the process to project themselves as the defenders of Rakhine Buddhist's interests¹².

Changed Scenario

China is Myanmar's largest trading partner. In the fiscal 2016, China has invested \$2.8 billion in the country. Between 1998 and 2017 its investment in Myanmar had reached a whopping \$19 billion. Given that public opposition forced Myanmar to suspend China's Myitsone Dam project in Kachin State in 2011, the Chinese are aware that unchecked local resistance to the pipelines could potentially get in the way of achieving their ambitions of keeping a land route open to its imports through Myanmar. According to sources familiar with the Southeast Asia Gas Pipeline Company's activity, protests contributed to delays in the pipeline's completion¹³.

China's Concerns

With increased investment in Myanmar, China appears to have realised the imperatives of a relatively stable and peaceful Myanmar¹⁴. China's need to secure overland access to the Indian Ocean also calls for maintaining good relations and influence over the Myanmar Government. Encouraging open conflict risks protracted retaliation by the Tatmadaw and would threaten China's larger interests.

After the elections in 2011, Myanmar's civilian government's attempt to encourage and perk up its relations with the United States, which resulted in the historic visit of President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton to the country, was a matter of concern for the Chinese. The need, therefore, was to maintain good relations with the civil government as well as the militant groups and be in a position to influence them to bring about peace which otherwise might force the government to seek help from the United States to restore peace in the country. The US military presence across Yunnan was definitely not in the Chinese interests.

China is, therefore, making serious efforts to reduce violence and bring about reconciliation between Myanmar's Government and the armed groups. Maung Aung Myoe, an expert on the Myanmar military at the International University of Japan says, "China wants quiet in Myanmar," "It hurts their interests to have fighting because it disrupts China's trade. China now owns the peace process. The Myanmar military knows that."¹⁵

China's interest lies in pushing the Arakan rebels to the negotiating table. They operate in the western state of Rakhine where they can disrupt the Chinese-built pipelines that carry oil and natural gas from the Bay of Bengal to southern China. Keeping Rakhine free of unrest may have been a factor in China blocking a U.N. Security Council statement on the military operations and the alleged human rights violations in Rakhine State in March 2017¹⁶.

China's Actions to Reduce Armed Clashes

In an effort to reduce fighting along the China–Myanmar border, in March 2017, China facilitated

a meeting between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Myanmar Government. In March 2017, the Agricultural Bank of China suspended an account of the MNDAA used for collecting funds for its activities from the Chinese people¹⁷ after the MNDAA, an ethnic rebel group based in the Kokang in the north-eastern part of the Shan State launched an attack on the Myanmar Government forces in Laukkai, Kokang's capital, killing at least 30 people and sending over 20,000 refugees fleeing from northern Myanmar into China. Beijing's move to broker peace with the KIA and bring the unhindered collection funds by the armed group to an end was a clear sign of its intentions to bring about peace in Myanmar's borders with a degree of autonomy to the rebel groups, besides cautioning the MNDAA and other armed groups against resorting to violence.

Prior to the May 2017 meeting of the 21st Century Panglong Conference, which was a meeting intended to establish peace in the country and attended by Myanmar's military, the government and various ethnic armed groups, the government was of the firm view that talks would not be held with three of the seven ethnic armed groups active in the country's conflict-ridden north as they had resorted to violence after the peace process had begun. The government had also stipulated that the participating ethnic groups need to sign the 'Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)', before any major political talks could be held. Yet, China flew representatives from all the seven northern armed groups, none of which had signed the NCA, in a chartered plane that departed from the Chinese city of Kunming and landed them in Naypyidaw. The move effectively presented Myanmar's civil and military authorities with a *fait accompli*, forcing them to include all seven of the ethnic armed groups that Beijing had been backing. The seven groups, led by the UWSA, had insisted that they would hold political dialogue before signing any NCA. As expected, the meeting ended inconclusively.

Considering China's stakes involved in bringing peace in Myanmar, some believed that Beijing would put pressure on the northern groups to sign the NCA. Instead, China chose to apply pressure on

the Myanmar Government to include its allies in the talks without preconditions¹⁸. The intention was to not alienate the ethnic armed groups and support them in getting autonomy within Myanmar, half way between supporting Myanmar Government and the armed groups. Surely China, contrary to its stand and statements, has embarked in meddling with the internal affairs of countries in which it is operating to meet its objectives.

China's interests in Myanmar are clear. China needs an alternate route for its imports by avoiding Malacca Strait and a land access to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar. It needs to maintain cordial relations with the Myanmar Government to back its commercial interests on its terms while at the same time, be in a position to keep the armed groups happy by supporting them to attain autonomy within Myanmar. Gaining support of the armed ethnic groups, who will act as China's proxies, will provide them the leverage to indistinctly coerce the government, besides providing protection to their projects within the country. China has successfully made use of the circumstances and created conditions to prevent the Myanmar Government from having a hold over its north-eastern states. Thus, Beijing's position will enable it to impose its will on Naypyidaw in all negotiations, including while brokering peace. Above all, Beijing needs more than Myanmar's support for its \$1 trillion OBOR flagship programme and its mission for greater presence in the Indian Ocean to succeed.

India's Interests in Myanmar – Connectivity

Trilateral Highway

India is developing the Kalewa-Yagyi stretch (101 km) to connect Manipur's Moreh with Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar. The road is expected to be completed by September 2019. Known as the 'India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway' (1360 km), the project involves repair of 69 bridges built during World War II and their approach roads. The 150 km India-Myanmar Friendship Road from the Moreh-Tamu border region to Kalemmyo-Kalewa in Myanmar, which was built with New Delhi's assistance and inaugurated in February 2001, forms part of the trilateral highway. India has proposed

extending the highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The proposed route from India to Vietnam is approximately 3,200 km long and is known as the East-West Economic Corridor, of which the road from Thailand to Cambodia and Vietnam have become operational in 2015. The road is expected to boost trade and commerce in the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area as well as with the rest of Southeast Asia.

Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project

The proposal for the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project was conceived by India, primarily to provide an alternative route to India's landlocked north-eastern states. At present, the only access to these seven states is through the Siliguri Corridor, a narrow strip of Indian territory wedged between Bhutan and Bangladesh. Routing all cargo destined for the north-east through this corridor causes significant transportation delays and cost overheads. As part of the project, the Sittwe Port, a deepwater port located at the mouth of the Kaladan River in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State was financed and constructed by India. The project was completed in 2017. The port will allow cargo vessels from landlocked Mizoram to navigate the Kaladan river and connect them to Myanmar and South East Asia.

India's Concern – Terrorism

The Falah-e-Insaniyat foundation (FIF), the so-called charitable arm of the Jama'at-ud-Da'wa (JUD), a jihadi group has been engaged in carrying out so-called relief work allegedly for Rohingya refugees. Its leaders have been active in refugee camps in Indonesia in Langsaah and Louk Samawa. Hafiz Saeed, the JUD Chief and a designated global terrorist, who is moving about freely in Pakistan has been actively involved in championing the Rohingya cause by organising workshops and related activities among refugees in Karachi, in particular. With JUD's background of engineering terror attacks across the Indian soil both in Jammu and Kashmir and in the interior, such as the 26/11 Mumbai attacks and an attack on the Indian Parliament, India is concerned

with the prospects of radicalisation of the Rohingya refugees and terrorists being infiltrated into India along with the migrating refugee groups.

In Myanmar, India's concerns relate to the Chinese-aided and supported armed ethnic groups, arming and providing a safe haven to India's north-east-based militant groups. The security of investments and construction and the operation of its infrastructure projects in Myanmar is yet another area of its unease.

Saudi Arabia's Role in Myanmar

International Crisis Group (ICG), a transnational non-profit, non-governmental organisation based in Brussels, Belgium founded in 1995 that carries out field research on violent conflicts and advanced policies to prevent, mitigate or resolve conflict, in a report released on December 15, 2016¹⁹, stated that the Rohingya Muslims who attacked the Myanmar border guards in October 2016 had links with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The Rohingya Movement is controlled by some 20 wealthy Rohingya businessmen settled in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Ata Ullah, head of the ARSA, who established the group in October 2016, was born in Karachi, Pakistan and moved to Mecca as a child²⁰. He is a Pakistani national and is said to have received billions of dollars from Saudi Arabia²¹. ARSA is said to be having links with both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. According to intelligence analysts, its mentor Abdus Qadoos Burmi is yet another Pakistani of Rohingya descent²². Based in Karachi, he has appeared in videos put out on social media calling for 'jihad' in Myanmar.

Pakistani and Afghan instructors are alleged to have given clandestine military training to villagers in Northern Rakhine for over two years prior to the attacks²³.

ARSA has called for an independent Islamic Rohingya state. Lt General Prakash Katoch, in his article in Firstpost, asserts "Pakistan's Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)-Lashkar-e-Taiba and Saudi-Al-Qaeda combined have engineered the Rohingya crisis for global jihad and the Islamic State has been eyeing

South Asia to expand its Islamic State Khorasan. This stark reality is being glossed over under the cover of the human misery bit—on the same lines that Syrian and many more non-Syrian refugees were inducted into Europe. It is not without reason that the Lashkar-e-Taiba cadres have been frequenting the Bangladesh-Myanmar border region. One of the aims is likely to bring down Sheikh Hasina, since she has clamped down on terrorist organisations in Bangladesh"²⁴. The 2016 ARSA attack on Security Forces is linked to funds from Saudi and Pakistani actors²⁵.

Analysts are of the opinion that the Rohingya insurgency is not an indigenous one but has been created. ARSA is led by Ataulah abu Ammar Junjuni, a Pakistani national who worked as a Wahhabi imam in Saudi Arabia prior to arriving in Myanmar. Interestingly, following Myanmar and Philippines forging closer ties with China, Myanmar and Philippines are the only two South East Asian countries which have been affected by the Saudi-funded Wahhabi insurgencies—ARSA in Myanmar and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Philippines²⁶.

Saudi Arabia stood to gain by funding and instigating the Rohingya conflict. Saudi's calculations were that a major crisis that had gained the attention of the United Nations could derail the completion of the Shwe oil pipeline which would benefit its interests. It would also benefit Saudi's ally, the United States, in its geopolitical game of containing China as well as Israel which stand to profit as a significant supplier of weapons to the Myanmar Government²⁷.

US Interests

Under the pretext of 'Promoting Democracy', the US Government has spent millions of dollars in Myanmar and on funding the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi to the extent that a US think tank 'Council on Foreign Relations' in a task force report titled, 'Burma: Time for Change' and authored by Mathea Falco, observed that the NLD and its leader, "cannot survive in Burma (Myanmar) without the help of the US and

the international community.” United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was one of the major donors which is reported to have spent \$18 million in Myanmar’s 2015 elections which saw Suu Kyi and her party win²⁸.

After Suu Kyi was elected in November 2015, the United States removed some government-run businesses and banks from the blacklist in an effort to kick-start trade. It removed the ‘national emergency’ designation on Myanmar that had been in place for two decades, facilitating the lifting of sanctions that had prevented investment in the country and added Myanmar to a roster of developing countries granting special trade status and allowing duty-free import of some 5000 items. After waiting till Suu Kyi came to power, the United States finally withdrew some of the sanctions against the country²⁹.

The aim was straight forward—to reign in the Chinese influence in Myanmar and to contain China. Hilary Clinton’s remark in a private speech of 2013, revealed by WikiLeaks, says it all. She is reported to have said, “We’re going to ring China with missile defence. We’re going to put more of our fleet in the area³⁰.”

At a conference organised by the US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, referring to China’s eagerness to end sectarian fighting in Rakhine State and other areas of Myanmar, Suu Kyi has expressed her belief that China “will do everything possible to promote our peace process”. Suu Kyi has visited Beijing twice since becoming Myanmar’s leader but had skipped an invitation from Washington to attend a conclave of South East Asian foreign ministers’ in the capacity as Myanmar’s Foreign Minister³¹.

Ever since Donald Trump’s election as the President, the United States has distanced itself from some of its earlier promises and engagement worldwide. It has not shown much interest in Myanmar, creating a vacuum in the country, thereby, allowing China a free run. However, in a broader context the US’s aim to create a conglomerate of nations around China that would support the US’s interests is clearly visible.

Conclusion

Myanmar is home to 135 officially recognised ethnic groups. The Rohingyas were detached from this list in 1982 and, thus, were deprived of their citizenship in the country. Denial of this status has demolished their ability to protect their land and homes, besides placing them in an apartheid-like environment by restricting their free movement, employment, access to healthcare and education³².

In analysing the recent violence, most have focused their attention on the role of ARSA, the armed ethnic group, and Myanmar’s military’s actions, not even realizing that the August 25, 2017 ARSA attack was not a coincidence but linked to the Advisory Commission’s report on Rakhine State headed by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and commissioned by the Myanmar Government. The report was released on August 23, 2017 recommending peaceful means to end the conflict³³.

Though the relevance and intricacy of the ethnic issues, armed violence and sufferings of the people cannot be denied or diminished, one cannot ignore the political and economic background, the ambitions of outside powers and their role in instigating violence or orchestrating peace efforts in the country. Deprivation of citizenship status to the minority section of the population or their forced displacement from areas close to the areas of interests of major powers cannot be without the interests and intent of one party or the other. Coastal areas of Rakhine State have critical strategic significance as it relates to the larger ambitions of major powers.

Taking away the land from small land owners without paying any compensation or providing alternate land to the affected people in the name of development projects, exploiting natural resources, major agricultural projects, including for the expansion of military camps, and so forth has been going on for quite some time³⁴.

In 2011, Myanmar instituted economic and political reforms and opened up to foreign investment. In 2012, Myanmar’s government established the

Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management Law (VFW Law) and the Farmland Law. These laws aimed at managing the use and distribution of farmlands. The Farmland law established the farm management bodies (FMB), which were replicated at state and local levels, replacing community bodies³⁵. These moves were criticised for facilitating large corporate houses to benefit from land grabs. In 2012, violence escalated against the Rohingyas living in the Rakhine State. It is possible that the Myanmar Government has vested interest in this strategically important land space for development or for leasing out the land to major powers seeking to establish themselves in the area for economic and military reasons.

Whatever be the reason, geopolitical manoeuvring in a foreign country cannot override or be at the cost of the people of that nation. To the extent of interfering with the internal affairs of the host country or using proxies to manoeuvre and influence the country concerned while remaining incognito is unlikely to go unnoticed by the local populace in the long run. Chinese copper mining projects and the gas projects close to Kyaukpyu are likely to evoke resource nationalism to intensify local resentment toward the SEZ. Insurgency will follow the day people realise the reality. They will take law and order into their hands and force the foreign power to quit through violent means.

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