



Research Article

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Received: 18 June 2024 / Accepted: 31 October 2024 / Published: 05 November 2024

Geopolitical Competition Between India and China in the Indian Ocean Region: the Case of Myanmar

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2024-0179>

Abstract

The 21st century has witnessed an intensification of the strategic rivalry between India and China, particularly in the Indian Ocean region, stemming from long-standing historical contradictions over border disputes and the competition for control over vital maritime trade routes crisscrossing the ocean. This rivalry has profoundly impacted the political and security landscape of countries within the region. Myanmar, being a pivotal geo-strategic location bordering both these powers, has emerged as a crucible for this competitive dynamic, wherein India and China are vying for influence and strategic leverage. This paper seeks to elucidate the nuanced position, role, and extent of competition between India and China in Myanmar. It delves into the multifaceted nature of this rivalry, encompassing not only geopolitical considerations but also economic interests and ideological underpinnings. The analysis underscores how the contradictions, conflicts, and divergent political-economic calculations of these two influential powers in the Indian Ocean region have manifested in a complex web of geopolitical competition within Myanmar. Through a rigorous examination of the historical context, contemporary developments, and the interplay of various factors shaping this dynamic, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the underlying drivers, strategies, and potential implications of India and China's competitive engagement in Myanmar. Ultimately, it concludes that the persistent tensions and power projections by these two major powers in the Indian Ocean have inevitably spilled over into the realm of Myanmar, rendering it a pivotal battleground for their strategic aspirations and regional influence.

Keywords: India; China; Myanmar; strategic competition; Indian Ocean

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the international community is witnessing the strong emergence of India and China with the potential to become global superpowers (Manuel & Gates, 2016). According to 2022 data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), India and China's economies have the highest GDP growth rates in the world. India ranks sixth with a total GDP of USD 2.66 trillion. China ranks second with a total GDP of USD 14.72 trillion. Experts predict both powers' economies will continue to develop rapidly in the future and maintain their positions as the two most populous countries in the 21st century (Global Peo Services, 2022). However, India and China have long had strained relations due to historical factors from the 20th century that still persist without definitive solutions today, relating mainly to border conflicts and water security issues in Tibet (Kiet, 2023).

The unresolved territorial disputes and rising tensions between India and China have significant geopolitical ramifications, particularly in regions where their spheres of influence overlap (Tan & Yoo, 2022). The Indian Ocean region has emerged as a strategic arena where these two Asian giants are vying for dominance and control over vital maritime trade routes (Kobayashi & King, 2022). As China's economic and military power continues to grow, its ambitions to expand its naval presence in the Indian Ocean have raised concerns for India, which has traditionally exerted influence over this maritime domain (Kiet, 2023). This geopolitical rivalry is further exacerbated by the complex web of alliances, partnerships, and strategic interests that both countries have cultivated in the region. India's long-standing relationships with nations like Myanmar, Vietnam, and Singapore, coupled with its efforts to strengthen ties with the United States and its allies, have positioned it as a counterweight to China's growing assertiveness. On the other hand, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its deepening economic and military cooperation with countries like Myanmar, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have allowed it to extend its reach and challenge India's traditional dominance in the Indian Ocean region.

In the 21st century, the fact that Chinese ships have to pass through strategic maritime positions in the Indian Ocean before reaching the Straits of Malacca and thereafter navigating the East and South China Seas, the "gateways" to China's most economically dynamic regions in the East, has become a vulnerability for the Chinese economy as the Indian Ocean is traditionally under India's influence. Therefore, India and China have competed fiercely in this region to increase power and control over the vital maritime trade routes across the Indian Ocean. Of which, Myanmar is a country with an important geostrategic position as it borders both regional powers and holds a special position in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. Moreover, its wealth of natural resources and minerals has made this country a destination for Indian and Chinese investors (Zhao, 2008). Thus, Myanmar has become an important target in India and China's competitive strategies across the Indian Ocean region. In this context, the present research aims to shed light on the intricate dynamics of the India-China geopolitical rivalry in Myanmar.

By examining the underlying motivations, strategies, and actions of the two powers in this strategically pivotal nation, the study seeks to unravel the complex interplay of economic, political, and security interests that shape their behavior. Furthermore, it aspires to elucidate the implications of this great power competition for regional stability, the future trajectory of India-China relations, and Myanmar's own strategic autonomy. Ultimately, this research endeavors to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the evolving geopolitical landscape in the Indian Ocean region, where the competition between established and rising powers is intensifying. Through an in-depth analysis of the India-China dynamics in Myanmar, the study aims to provide valuable insights for policymakers, strategic analysts, and other stakeholders navigating the intricate web of relationships and rivalries in this crucial part of the world.

2. Literature Review

In recent times, there have been many studies related to the strategic competitive relationship between India and China in Myanmar in particular and the Indian Ocean in general. Typically, the study “Sino-Indian Competition in Southeast Asia” analyzed the impact of the competitive relationship between India and China on the Southeast Asian region, in which the study especially emphasized Myanmar’s strategic position and role for both India and China in the Bay of Bengal in particular and the Indian Ocean in general (Liem & Thao, 2021, pp.153-170). The study “China And India: Competing For Good Relations With Myanmar” analyzed the competition between India and China in Myanmar with the desire to establish a strategic partnership with this country. It pointed out that both India and China see Myanmar as a country with an important geostrategic position in controlling the vital maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean and containing each other’s influence in the region (Zhao, 2008). On the other hand, the study “Sino-Indian Maritime Ambitions Collide in the Indian Ocean” analyzed how India and China’s maritime control ambitions in the Indian Ocean have made the two powers compete in global strategies across the region. Of which, Myanmar plays a very important role for India in blocking China’s ambitions down into the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. And vice versa, Myanmar also plays a very crucial role for China in containing India’s eastern borders in particular and India’s Look East Policy in general (Pant, 2014). However, the above studies have not specifically and comprehensively analyzed the position, role and context of competition between India and China in Myanmar today. Therefore, this study aims to fill the research gap on the topic. In addition, to further clarify the context of geopolitical competition between the two countries in Myanmar, the study could also refer to some other research such as “Myanmar’s China Policy since 2011: Determinants and Directions” (Myoe, 2015), “China’s policy towards Myanmar: Yunnan’s commitment to Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines and Border Economic Cooperation Zone” (Yoshikawa, 2022) and “India-Myanmar Relations: Triumph of Pragmatism” (Routray, 2012). These studies provide deeper insights into the strategic importance of Myanmar in the context of the regional power struggle between India and China in the Indian Ocean.

The literature review highlights the importance of examining the geopolitical competition between India and China in Myanmar from both theoretical and practical standpoints. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the broader discourse on power dynamics and strategic rivalries among emerging powers in the 21st century. The India Ocean region has emerged as a critical arena for great power competition, with India and China vying for influence and access to vital maritime trade routes. Myanmar’s unique geographic position and its role as a potential gateway to the Indian Ocean make it a focal point in this strategic tussle. By analyzing the underlying motivations, policies, and initiatives of India and China in Myanmar, this research sheds light on the complex interplay of economic, political, and security considerations that shape the behavior of rising powers. Moreover, the study carries significant practical implications for regional stability and the future trajectory of India-China relations. As the two Asian giants continue to assert their influence globally, their competitive dynamics in Myanmar could have far-reaching consequences for the regional power balance. A deeper understanding of the geopolitical competition in this context is crucial for policymakers, strategic analysts, and other stakeholders to navigate the shifting landscape effectively. Additionally, the insights gained from this research could inform Myanmar’s foreign policy formulation, enabling the country to strike a delicate balance between its powerful neighbors while safeguarding its own strategic interests and autonomy. Ultimately, this study contributes to a more nuanced comprehension of the intricate web of relationships and rivalries that characterize the evolving geopolitical landscape in the India Ocean region.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach combining policy analysis, historical methods, and document synthesis to examine the geopolitical competition between India and China in Myanmar.

These methodological approaches allow for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play in this strategic rivalry.

Frist, policy analysis. The primary methodological approach utilized is policy analysis, which enables a systematic examination of the policies, strategies, and actions of India and China towards Myanmar. This method involves critically analyzing official policy documents, statements, and initiatives of both countries to discern their strategic objectives, priorities, and approaches in engaging with Myanmar. For India, the study examines key policy frameworks such as the Look East Policy (later Act East Policy), focusing on how Myanmar fits into India's broader regional strategy. This includes analyzing infrastructure projects, economic agreements, and diplomatic initiatives aimed at enhancing India's presence and influence in Myanmar. The analysis pays particular attention to how these policies have evolved in response to China's growing footprint in the region. Similarly, for China, the study scrutinizes policies like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), assessing how they reflect China's strategic interests in Myanmar. The analysis explores how China has leveraged economic diplomacy, infrastructure development, and political support to strengthen its position in Myanmar. The policy analysis also extends to Myanmar's own policies and responses to the India-China rivalry. This includes examining Myanmar's efforts to balance relations between the two powers and its strategies for maintaining strategic autonomy amidst growing great power competition. By comparing and contrasting the policies of India and China, the study aims to identify areas of convergence, divergence, and potential friction points in their approaches to Myanmar. This analysis helps illuminate the underlying motivations, priorities, and challenges faced by both countries in their engagement with Myanmar.

Second, historical methods. The study incorporates historical methods to trace the evolution of India-China relations with Myanmar over time. This approach provides crucial context for understanding the current dynamics of competition and cooperation between the three countries. The historical analysis begins with examining the colonial legacy and its impact on the geopolitical landscape of the region. It then traces key events and developments in India-Myanmar and China-Myanmar relations from the post-independence period through the Cold War era and into the 21st century. This includes analyzing major turning points such as Myanmar's period of isolation under military rule, its subsequent opening up and reforms, and recent events like the 2021 military coup. By adopting a long-term historical perspective, the study aims to identify recurring patterns, enduring interests, and shifts in the strategic calculations of India and China with Myanmar. This historical context helps explain the deep-rooted nature of the current geopolitical competition and the complex interplay of factors shaping the trilateral relationship. The historical method also involves analyzing primary sources such as diplomatic correspondence, speeches, and memoirs of key political figures to gain insights into the decision-making processes and strategic thinking behind policy choices. This helps in understanding the continuities and changes in India and China's approaches to Myanmar over time.

Third, document synthesis. Given the complex and multifaceted nature of the topic, the study relies heavily on document synthesis to integrate information from a wide range of sources. This involves systematically collecting, reviewing, and synthesizing relevant academic literature, policy reports, news articles, and official documents related to India-China competition in Myanmar. The document synthesis process begins with a comprehensive literature review covering academic journals, books, think tank reports, and policy papers on topics such as India's Act East Policy, China's BRI, Myanmar's foreign relations, and broader geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. This helps in identifying key themes, debates, and gaps in the existing scholarship. The study also analyzes official documents such as bilateral agreements, joint statements, and strategic vision documents to understand the formal frameworks guiding India-China engagement with Myanmar. Additionally, it examines economic data, trade statistics, and investment figures to assess the tangible impacts of their competing strategies. To ensure a balanced perspective, the document synthesis incorporates diverse viewpoints from Indian, Chinese, Myanmar, and international sources. This includes analyzing media reports, opinion pieces, and expert commentaries to capture the ongoing

debates and differing interpretations of events. The synthesis process involves critically evaluating and cross-referencing information from multiple sources to identify consistent patterns, corroborate findings, and highlight areas of consensus or disagreement. This approach helps in constructing a comprehensive and nuanced narrative of the India-China competition in Myanmar, while also acknowledging the limitations and potential biases in the available information.

In summary, the study integrates these three methodological approaches - policy analysis, historical methods, and document synthesis - to provide a holistic understanding of the research topic. The policy analysis offers insights into current strategies and decision-making processes, while the historical methods provide crucial context and long-term perspective. The document synthesis ties these elements together by incorporating diverse sources and viewpoints. This integrated approach allows for a multidimensional examination of the India-China competition in Myanmar, considering political, economic, strategic, and cultural factors. It enables the study to move beyond surface-level observations to uncover deeper patterns, motivations, and implications of this geopolitical rivalry. By combining these methodological approaches, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics shaping India-China relations with Myanmar and their broader implications for regional stability and power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific.

4. Results

4.1 *The Importance of Myanmar in India-China Relations*

The competitive dynamic between India and China in the Indian Ocean region stems from historical disputes over border conflicts and rivalry for control of vital maritime routes on the ocean, which has strongly impacted the political and security situation of countries in the region (Kiet, 2023). Myanmar is a nation located in Southeast Asia with an area of 676,577 km², geographically bordering India in the west on land and the maritime region of India in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea in the south, and bordering China in the north (Myanmar National Portal, 2023). Therefore, Myanmar is a neighbor of India and China, and also shares similarities in history, culture, and religion with the ancient civilizations of India and China (Konovalov, 2022). Along with the explosion of globalization and the rise of economic power and influence of China and India, Myanmar, with its strategic geographical position bordering both powers, plays a core role in the competitive strategy of India and China in the Indian Ocean region. As a result, Myanmar quickly became the center of power rivalry between these two powers in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia regions.

First, Myanmar holds a significant strategic position for both India and China. For India, Myanmar is the gateway to Southeast Asia and ASEAN (Ayob, 2016). Through Myanmar, India can expand its economic, political, and security influence to the East. Infrastructure projects connecting India with Myanmar and Thailand will help India expand its export and import markets (Paode, 2013). In addition, India also wants Myanmar to become a security partner to control maritime security in the Bay of Bengal and the Malacca Strait (Liem et al., 2021, p.153). For China, Myanmar is an important part of the "String of Pearls" strategy aimed at encircling and restraining India's influence in the region (Binh et al., 2020). Controlling Myanmar will help China expand its influence to Southeast Asia and South Asia (Hoa, 2022). Furthermore, China can also use Myanmar as a military and intelligence base to monitor India's military activities in the Indian Ocean. In particular, China is promoting the construction of a deep-water port in Kyaukpyu (Myanmar) to ensure energy security and expand its influence in the Indian Ocean (Kiet, 2023). The competition for influence in Myanmar is an important part of the strategy of both India and China. Controlling Myanmar will help each side increase its strategic position in the Indian Ocean-Pacific region. In addition, both countries want to increase their influence in Myanmar for regional security reasons. China wants to control the activities of minority insurgent groups on its southern border that threaten China's security, while India wants to prevent China's growing influence in this region (Liem et al., 2021,

p.154). This is the reason why Myanmar has become a hot spot of rivalry between the two Asian powers.

Second, Myanmar possesses abundant natural resources and significant economic development potential, attracting the interest of both India and China. Myanmar has the third-largest oil reserves in Southeast Asia, along with many precious minerals such as copper, lead, zinc, and gold. It also has significant potential in hydropower and agriculture (Myanmar National Portal, 2023). Access to these resources brings significant economic benefits to both India and China. In addition, Myanmar's economy is in a development phase, attracting many investors. Infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, seaports, airports... will stimulate Myanmar's development and open up large business opportunities for Indian and Chinese companies. Strategically, Myanmar is the gateway for India and China to expand their influence to the South and access the Southeast Asian market (Pant, 2014). Therefore, strategic infrastructure projects such as deep-water ports, oil pipelines... in Myanmar also become hot spots causing disputes between the two countries. Therefore, with its large economic development potential, Myanmar is an attractive destination for Indian and Chinese investors. The competition for economic influence in Myanmar to access resources and expand the Southeast Asian market is an important aspect of the strategic rivalry between the two Asian powers.

Third, Myanmar holds a central position in the regional connectivity initiatives of China and India, where the competition for influence between the two countries is fierce. Myanmar is in a key position in China's BRI (Binh et al., 2020). Important infrastructure projects such as the deep-water port of Kyaukpyu, the Kunming-Kyaukpyu railway, and the China-Myanmar economic corridors all aim to connect China with the Indian Ocean through Myanmar. Myanmar's participation in the BRI has helped China increase its economic and strategic influence in the region. Meanwhile, India also has a regional connectivity initiative, the East-West Economic Corridor, in which Myanmar plays an important role (Kiet, 2023). This corridor project aims to reduce the dependence of countries on China, while enhancing trade connectivity with India. Therefore, the competition for economic and strategic influence between India and China is fierce in Myanmar. In addition to infrastructure projects, China also uses diplomatic tools such as aid, investment, and signing free trade agreements to increase its influence in Myanmar (Wee, 2015). Conversely, India also promotes security and military cooperation with Myanmar to consolidate its position, making Myanmar one of the strategic rivalry centers of India and China in the Southeast Asia and Indian Ocean regions (Mehrotra, 2012).

Fourth, Myanmar holds a strategic position crucial to India's national security. Myanmar serves as a barrier preventing China's southward expansion, a region traditionally influenced by India. If China gains control over Myanmar, it would pose a direct threat to the security of India's northeastern border (Kiet, 2023). Therefore, India needs to maintain its influence in Myanmar to curb China's expansion. Additionally, Myanmar holds a strategic position vital to India's maritime security. Controlling ports and islands in Myanmar would help India protect the Bay of Bengal, control the Strait of Malacca, and the Indian Ocean-Pacific Ocean shipping route (Das, 2010). Furthermore, Myanmar is a potential military base for India to expand its influence throughout the region. Access to strategic infrastructure such as seaports, military airports... would facilitate India's deployment of forces and strengthen its military power in the Indian Ocean region. Therefore, when China publicly expanded its influence southward in the late 1990s, this event caused a fundamental shift in India's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia in general and Myanmar in particular through the "Look East Policy". The Indian government quickly shifted to a more pragmatic approach to the military government in Myanmar, while not condemning opposition to democracy issues in this country as before 1991 (Alam, 2018). Therefore, with its strategic position in security and military, Myanmar has become a hot spot of rivalry between India and China, which has made the dispute over influence in this country increasingly fierce.

4.2 Myanmar in the competition strategy between India and China

Since the late 1990s, China's leadership has publicly decided to expand its influence down to South Asia and the Indian Ocean, areas seen as traditionally influenced by India (Pant, 2014). This has severely impacted India's national security policy, especially as both powers have contradictions and conflicts in the Tibetan border area that remain unresolved with appropriate solutions for the core interests of India and China. This has eroded trust between the leaders of the two powers regarding a comprehensive, friendly and reliable cooperative relationship in today's world context. Therefore, China has built a String of Pearls Strategy through the BRI and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to establish a network surrounding the entire scope of India's land and ocean space (Dabas, 2017). To counter China's expanding power moves, India's leadership has implemented the Look East Policy to increase its power and influence over Southeast Asian countries, while also balancing China's strategy with countries in this region (Mehrotra, 2012). Of which, Myanmar is a country with an important geopolitical position in the competitive strategies between India and China across the Indian Ocean region. Therefore, both powers have comprehensive cooperation policies with Myanmar. This is demonstrated through the following two contents:

4.2.1 Myanmar in India's Strategy

Myanmar is India's neighbor bordering both land and sea, while also sharing historical, cultural and religious similarities with India's ancient civilization. Therefore, the two peoples have an intimate relationship bound by history and interactions between the two countries. During the colonial period, Myanmar was once part of India when the British Empire invaded and incorporated it into India's territory in 1886 (Godrej, 2008). After Myanmar gained independence on January 4, 1948, India-Myanmar relations continued to be close and intimate under the democratic government led by Prime Minister U Nu, who believed it was "the firm India-Myanmar friendship forever" (Ayob, 2016). However, the 1962 coup by the military government led by General Ne Win made India-Myanmar relations become unstable as India opposed the rise of the authoritarian regime that disregarded "democratic" values. Until 1991, upon realizing China's growing influence in Myanmar, India's leadership adjusted its approach towards the military government in Myanmar by implementing the Look East Policy since 2014 which then developed into the Act East Policy to promote India's two core objectives regarding this country, including:

First, building Myanmar into an intermediary area connecting India with ASEAN.

On July 24, 1991, India carried out comprehensive economic reforms towards a free, open and internationally integrated direction after a long period of pursuing an inward-looking, self-sufficient economic model that India applied before the end of the Cold War period (Singh, 2019). Therefore, to enhance cooperation with countries in the region, especially with ASEAN, the government of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao (1991-1996) adopted the Look East Policy strategy in 1992 with the goal of strengthening economic connectivity between countries in the region, comprehensively developing and deeply integrating with ASEAN economies (Paode, 2013). Of which, Myanmar plays the role of an intermediary area connecting India's remote, impoverished Northeast region with ASEAN, aiming to build an economic corridor extending from South Asia to the East Sea and heading towards major economies in Northeast Asia, Southeast Asian island countries, Oceania, thereby creating an economic leverage for the development of the Northeast region and India's economy. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh remarked: "Myanmar is a key partner in India's Look East Policy and has an advantageous geographical location to become an economic bridge between India and China, between South Asia and Southeast Asia" (Ayob, 2016). Therefore, to implement its strategic goals, India has taken a more pragmatic and appropriate approach to the political situation in Myanmar, by improving relations with the Myanmar military government with a commitment to respect "domestic" issues within the government and promoting comprehensive cooperative relations in line with the core interests between India and Myanmar (Das, 2010). As a result, the bilateral relationship

quickly became warm as Myanmar was facing international isolation due to issues of civil war, democracy and ethnic conflicts.

Table 1: India’s major infrastructure connectivity projects in Myanmar as of February 2023

No	Project Name	Investment Level
1	Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project	484 million USD
2	India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project	170 billion USD
3	Rakhine State Development Programme	25 million USD
4	India - Myanmar Border Area Development Project	25 million USD

Source: Banerjee, S. (2023)

As shown in Table 1, currently, as of February 2023, India has four major infrastructure connectivity projects in Myanmar, including: (1) The Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project approved in 2008 with a total investment of \$484 million; (2) The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project approved in 2002 with a total investment of \$17 billion. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is a 1,360 km route connecting Moreh, India, with Mae Sot, Thailand; (3) The Rakhine State Development Programme approved in 2018 with a total investment of \$25 million; (4) The India - Myanmar Border Area Development Project approved in 2017 with a total investment of \$25 million. These projects aim to establish connectivity corridors with Eastern countries - India, create economic momentum for the four Northeast states, including Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur. At the same time, building a maritime route through Myanmar to reduce pressure on the strategic Siliguri corridor, the only route connecting the Northeast to the Indian “subcontinent” (Banerjee, 2023). In addition, in the 2017-2022 period, India initiated 68 community projects worth \$3.4 million in Myanmar under the Quick Impact Projects Programme (Rajeshwar, 2022). As of 2022, India’s investment in Myanmar’s energy sector has reached over \$1.2 billion, and the two countries are trying to discuss establishing an oil refinery and petrochemical plant in Thanlyin in the future (Rajeshwar, 2022). Currently, India is Myanmar’s sixth largest trading partner, with total trade turnover of \$1.36 billion (SAC’s Ministry of Commerce, 2023). Although bilateral economic cooperation has not been commensurate with the good political relationship, the huge investment in infrastructure projects and shared interests in containing China’s influence in Myanmar have brought India and Myanmar together amid increasingly complex regional and global developments.

India’s multi-modal connectivity projects in Myanmar are part of a broader strategy to enhance regional integration and economic development in India’s Northeast region. By linking this relatively isolated area with Myanmar and the larger ASEAN market, India aims to boost trade, investment, and overall economic growth. The Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project, in particular, seeks to establish an alternative transportation corridor that bypasses the narrow Siliguri corridor, reducing potential strategic vulnerabilities. It has the potential to enhance ASEAN-India trade, and further extension to Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam could boost economic growth significantly (Pande, 2024). However, these ambitious infrastructure undertakings have faced significant delays and cost overruns. For example, the Kaladan project, initially scheduled for completion in 2013, is still underway at increasing costs and is still not completed by 2024 (Bhattacharyya, 2024). Challenges like difficult terrain, political instability in Myanmar since the 2021 coup, and coordination issues between the two countries have hindered progress. In particular, the Kaladan project is being severely affected by the internal conflict between the Arakan rebel army and the Myanmar military. Although a spokesperson for the Arakan insurgents confirmed: “We have ensured security for the project along the Kaladan since 2021. There is no security threat to the project” (Bhattacharyya, 2024). However, the 2019 incident when 10 people, including 4 Indian citizens and 2 employees of Engineers Projects India Limited (EPIL), were kidnapped by the Arakan Army between Paletwa and Kyauktaw has

haunted the contractors involved in the project. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the contractors will be willing to deploy their workforce in the conflict areas. This highlights the importance of robust risk assessment, planning, and flexibility in adjusting to evolving geopolitical and on-the-ground realities when pursuing such large cross-border initiatives. Looking ahead, India will likely sustain its AEP efforts focused on elevating ties with ASEAN states and leveraging Myanmar's strategic position as a bridge. Balancing its interests with China's growing regional footprint will remain a key consideration. Overall, enhancing physical and economic connectivity through Myanmar is a long-term strategic priority for India, notwithstanding near-term challenges, as it seeks to energize its Northeast region and broader regional integration goals.

Second, blocking China's influence down to the Indian Ocean region.

Since the late 1990s, China has publicly decided to expand its power down to South Asia and the Indian Ocean, in which Myanmar occupies an important position in China's neighboring diplomacy policy. According to Petr Konovalov's assessment, China is actively establishing Myanmar's geographical position to become a blockade of Eastern India, similar to the role of Pakistan and Afghanistan in Northern India (Konovalov, 2022). India and Myanmar have maritime borders in the Bay of Bengal as well as land borders over 1,600 km long. At the same time, Myanmar also borders four states in India's Northeast: Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram (Liem & Thao, 2021, p.165). Therefore, Myanmar plays the role of India's "gateway" to Southeast Asia as part of its Look East Policy (1991) and later the Act East Policy (2014). India has deep concerns about preventing China from establishing a strategic foothold in Myanmar that could enable it to project power into the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. Myanmar's long coastline along the Bay of Bengal and borders with four northeastern Indian states make it a potential gateway for China to India's eastern flanks. Allowing China's oversized influence in Myanmar risks creating a situation akin to India's western front, where it is hemmed in by a Chinese presence in Pakistan and Afghanistan. When studying the competitive relationship between India and China in Myanmar, scholar Mohan Malik has shown the importance of Myanmar and the acknowledgment of its role in the competition between "the two Asian giants":

"Nowhere is this contest for regional hegemony between China and India more evident than in Myanmar which occupies a critical strategic position between the two countries. China's inroads into Myanmar since 1990, especially the build-up of naval facilities in the Bay of Bengal and its possible use by the Chinese military, are, from New Delhi's perspective, serious encroachments into India's sphere of influence. Indian strategists now see China as constituting a threat in the east as well as in the north. The growing military nexus between China and Myanmar has recently prompted the Indian Government to reassess its policy towards Yangon and to emphasize the complementarity of interests between India and the United States, India and ASEAN, and India and Japan, in containing China's growing economic and military influence in the Asia-Pacific" (Malik, 1995).

Currently, China has been trying to set a "trap" to drag Myanmar into China's orbit. This would create geopolitical advantages in its competitive relationship with India. When analyzing China's motivation for involvement in Myanmar, scholar Brian Gicheru Kinyua argues: "In Myanmar, China saw the opportunity for direct access to the Indian Ocean, a significant expansion of its maritime power beyond its sphere of influence in the Pacific, consistent with China's naval strategy of controlling vital sea lines of communication across the Indian Ocean" (Kinyua, 2022). Thus, upon realizing China's growing presence in Myanmar after the military government arrested Aung San Suu Kyi in 1989, India changed its more pragmatic approach towards Myanmar's military government to prevent the Eastern region from being isolated similarly to the Northern region. At the same time, it aims to curb the expanding power scope of China down into the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean region. Therefore, India shifted its pragmatic foreign policy to strengthen comprehensive cooperation with Myanmar, overlooking the "democracy" issues that had caused discordant relations between India-Myanmar in the 1962-1991 period (Routray, 2012). As a result, bilateral relations quickly improved as Myanmar also wanted to reduce its sole dependence on China and enhance "strategic autonomy" on international relations issues in the region and the world. Moreover, cultural,

historical and religious similarities as well as efforts to resolve border instability between the two sides have helped India-Myanmar relations quickly move in a positive, warm direction. Thereby, Myanmar enabled India to build the Sittwe port in Myanmar's Rakhine state to demonstrate India's strong reaction to the Kyaukpyu port facing China in Rakhine (Rajeshwar, 2022).

To counter this threat, India has actively courted Myanmar with pragmatic policies and strategic investments like the Sittwe port, located in direct competition with China's project at Kyaukpyu. An agreement on the project was signed between the governments of India and Myanmar in April 2009. The contract for the construction of Sittwe port was awarded to India's Essar Group. The 120 million USD port is being financed through a long-term, interest-free line of credit from India. By 2023, Sittwe port was officially successfully built and received the first shipment of about 1,000 tons of cement departing from India's Kolkata port (Ramachandran, 2023). By strengthening economic, security, and people-to-people ties with Myanmar, India aims to bind the country more closely within its geostrategic orbit and make it less susceptible to Chinese overtures or coercion. From India's standpoint, a Myanmar closely aligned with or under the heavy influence of China could severely undermine India's core national security interests. It would provide China with strategic depth to potentially impede or interdict India's maritime access to Southeast Asia and the critical shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean. This could grievously impact India's economic and military logistics in the event of a conflict. An emboldened Chinese presence in Myanmar could enable the Chinese navy to operate and concentrate forces in the Bay of Bengal, outflanking India's eastern seaboard and coastal cities. China could potentially use this position to cut off India's maritime trade routes and supply lines, crippling its economy and ability to project power. Myanmar's long coastline and ports like Kyaukpyu run the risk of being turned into Chinese naval bastions in India's near seas.

Moreover, the ethnic insurgencies simmering in Myanmar's border regions with India's northeast could become a grave security menace if stoked or supported by a hostile China using Myanmar as a staging ground. India has long sought to stabilize these border areas which are riven by militancy, narcotics trafficking, and illegal migration that spills over into its territories. To counteract these dangers, India has implemented a multi-pronged engagement strategy aimed at denying China an outright strategic foothold in Myanmar that could be leveraged to restrict India's eastward orientation. Building economic connectivity through projects like the Sittwe port and bolstering defense cooperation have been key tenets of this approach to maintain Myanmar's autonomy. Therefore, preserving Myanmar's equidistance and neutrality between India and China remains a paramount priority for India to safeguard its strategic flexibility and secure its eastern frontiers and maritime environs in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean regions. Preventing Myanmar from becoming a Chinese client state or vassal is crucial for protecting India's core interests. Overall, India has vital interests in Myanmar to ensure the Eastern region and the Bay of Bengal are always under India's control, blocking China's "expansionist" ambitions into this area.

4.2.2 Myanmar in China's Strategy

Entering the early 21st century, China has shown increasing interest in its neighbor Myanmar in order to expand its sphere of influence in this country, creating favorable conditions for the development of the "Southbound" strategy (Binh & Hoa, 2020). Currently, the geopolitical competition between China and India in Myanmar is increasingly fierce but tends to benefit China. China's leaders have built an "arc" to access and surround the territorial space of India with the goal of implementing the "India Encirclement Strategy" (Kim, 2013). Myanmar has become a "barrier" to contain India's influence to the East, while also facilitating conditions to observe India's actions in the Indian Ocean region (Myoe, 2015). In addition, China has also strengthened relations in the region and with India's neighboring countries like Afghanistan and its ally Pakistan to curb India's influence to the West and South Asia. Moreover, China is implementing a neighboring diplomatic policy, pursuing core strategic goals in the context of rapid domestic and international changes, including many unpredictable fluctuations, unlike when Xi Jinping first took power in 2013 (Hoa, 2022). For a long

time, Myanmar has considered China as a priority partner in its foreign policy, so dependence on China is inevitable. The two countries have always maintained a special relationship and Myanmar's geographical location, domestic and international situation determine that it cannot sever relations with China (Hien, 2018). Meanwhile, China takes advantage of every opportunity to establish its position and increase its influence in Myanmar. This is demonstrated through the following points: First, China enhances its influence with political forces in Myanmar.

Myanmar has an extremely complex and unpredictable political situation. Therefore, at different stages, China has always tried to approach and demonstrate flexible political attitudes. In the 2011-2015 period, China paid special attention to the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), considering it an important partner and showing active interest (Fan & Zou, 2019). This was demonstrated by Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang's official visit to Myanmar in November 2014, during which he pledged cooperation in many areas with Myanmar. In the same period, China played an observer role towards the National League for Democracy (NLD) Party, especially its Chairwoman - Aung San Suu Kyi, who was seen as a symbol of global democracy. After the NLD's landslide victory in the 2015 election, China changed its stance by showing respect for Chairwoman Aung San Suu Kyi. Her position was enhanced while China sought to mollify bilateral relations and affirm shared interests between the sides (Binh, 2015). The subsequent visits by NLD leaders were also met by China's leaders who promised important political-economic cooperation. Additionally, China also took the opportunity to establish close relationships with other senior NLD leaders.

In Myanmar, the military plays an important role and has decision-making power over political issues. China has succeeded in influencing and approaching Myanmar's political factions. During military rule, Myanmar's military government received China's full support. Although Myanmar's political situation is complex and constantly changing, China's influence on the military remains unchanged. In Myanmar's "one country, two governments" period from 2010 to 2015, the political situation was severely unstable as the civilian government could not influence the military. China flexibly balanced diplomatic relations with political forces, depending on timing and its own interests. Myanmar's coup in February 2021 raised suspicions about China's role and China's indecisive reaction further affirmed these doubts. The NLD's shift in foreign policy to reduce dependence on China and diversify relations with India, the US, Japan, etc. had shaken China's position (Shang, 2022).

Beyond consolidating relations with Myanmar's various political forces, China also seeks to counter India's growing political influence in Myanmar, its neighboring country and regional rival. India shares deep historical and cultural ties with Myanmar. During the semi-democratic government's rule (2011-2021), India increased its economic and strategic presence in Myanmar through major investments in infrastructure, energy, and other crucial sectors (Pande, 2023). New Delhi views Myanmar as an important partner in its AEP strategy aimed at boosting its influence in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean to counterbalance China's rising power. The opening of the Sittwe port project was an important milestone allowing India to improve its connectivity with Southeast Asia and enhance its influence in Myanmar. Faced with India's inroads, Beijing is intensifying efforts to maintain its control over Myanmar, a strategic buffer state allowing access to the Indian Ocean and providing an alternative to reliance on maritime routes through the Strait of Malacca (Kiet, 2023). Politically, China openly supports Myanmar's military regime despite international condemnation, hoping to preserve its influence to India's detriment, as India has traditionally been closer to democratic forces. Thus, the 2021 military coup against Myanmar's democracy forces aligning more closely with India and the U.S. has raised much evidence of China's backing (Zhabina, 2021). The Indo-Chinese strategic rivalry in Myanmar reflects the escalating tensions between the two Asian giants over regional hegemony. The intensifying power struggle has turned Myanmar into a geopolitical battleground where China and India are vying to extend their respective strategic footholds and spheres of influence through economic, political and security levers. As such, Myanmar exemplifies the broader Sino-Indian rivalry playing out across the India Ocean region.

Second, China uses ethnic-religious issues and the Rohingya to intervene in Myanmar.

Myanmar is a country with an important geographical location and abundant natural resources. Moreover, with over 100 years of colonial history and diversity of 135 different ethnicities, Myanmar is facing many political actors participating in the democratization process (Mai & Anh, 2019). Although it has carried out democratic reforms, ethnic-religious issues remain a major challenge in Myanmar's democratization and international integration. Ethnic conflict in Myanmar is an important tool for China to intervene in this country, as China has interests in both conflict and peace between Myanmar's government and armed ethnic groups, especially in the Northern border area adjacent to China. Beijing would benefit if Myanmar can maintain peace, as this would facilitate cross-border economic relations, strengthen cultural diplomacy, create investment opportunities and limit the impact of refugees on China (Kobayashi & King, 2022). Meanwhile, China also benefits if conflict occurs due to the enhancement of influence, control and covert power in Myanmar. China clearly demonstrated this after Myanmar's political reforms, such as playing the intermediary role between Myanmar's civilian government and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). China provided the negotiation venue, ensured security for the talks between the two sides, and played the coordinating and mediating role with the approach of "pursuing peace and promoting dialogue" (Wee, 2015). In this context, China exerted pressure on Myanmar to resolve the situation in its own favor. China is believed to have imposed pressure to maintain conflict when Myanmar's government carried out political reforms detrimental to China and intervened in the peace negotiation process in Myanmar (Yoshikawa, 2022).

The issue of the Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic group, is a complex problem in Myanmar. The Rohingya have become targets of attacks by Myanmar's military and Rakhine people after the Myanmar government refused to recognize them as an official ethnic group in the 1982 Constitution (Dang & Le, 2018). This issue has received international attention and criticism. On August 25, 2017, an attack by Rohingya militants on police stations and military bases in Myanmar triggered a military crackdown campaign against the Rohingya (Nhien, 2018), causing tensions in relations between Myanmar and Western countries. In the first two decades of the 21st century, China has increased its influence in Myanmar by continuously defending the military government against international criticism and sanctions (Binh & Hoa, 2020). International sanctions and criticism pushed Myanmar into a passive position in international relations. In this context, China took the opportunity to demonstrate its role and influence by supporting Myanmar government's efforts to ensure peace and stability in Rakhine state, while also "protecting" Myanmar from international pressure and sanctions at the United Nations Security Council. This was an opportunity for China to establish and affirm its position and influence over Myanmar and autonomy in steering "major power diplomacy".

Therefore, it can be seen that China uses ethnic-religious issues and the Rohingya issue in Myanmar to increase its influence and soft power in the region, as well as strategically compete with India in Myanmar in the following ways: (1) China has dual interests in maintaining peace as well as prolonging conflicts between the Myanmar government and ethnic armed groups, especially in the northern border area adjacent to China. This allows Beijing to increase its influence, control, and covert power in Myanmar. China has played an intermediary role, facilitating negotiations between the Myanmar government and armed groups in a way that benefits itself; (2) China has continuously defended the Myanmar military government against international criticism and sanctions over the Rohingya crisis, including blocking punitive resolutions at the UN Security Council. This has allowed China to assert its position and influence over Myanmar as well as its freedom of action in "major power diplomacy" in the region, thereby strategically competing with India. In summary, China has skillfully exploited the complex ethnic and religious issues in Myanmar to increase its soft power, while maintaining the ability to intervene and control the situation according to its own interests, thereby competing for influence with other powers in Myanmar, including India.

Third, leverage economic power to create Myanmar's dependence on China.

Myanmar is described as a "virtual satellite of China", as a security barrier and strategic "buffer zone" for China (Loc, 2022). Economic leverage is an important factor in China's implementation of important strategies to realize the "China Dream". During Myanmar's political reform process, China

had to adjust to restore economic influence after fierce competition from India and Myanmar government policies. China leverages its economic power to create Myanmar's dependence and strengthen its influence in the country, thereby strategically competing with India's economic cooperation in Myanmar. China has stepped up investment in social welfare projects and changed the social responsibility of local businesses in Myanmar, while expanding trade and economy through BRI commitments (Table 2).

Table 2: Key BRI projects in Myanmar

No	Project Name	Description
1	Kyaukphyu Deep Seaport Project	Deep seaport project in Kyaukphyu, Rakhine State
2	Mandalay-Kyaukphyu Railway Project	Railway connecting Mandalay and Kyaukphyu
3	Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ)	Development Project Special economic zone in Kyaukphyu, Rakhine State
4	Myitkyina Economic Development Zone Project	Special economic zone in Myitkyina, Kachin State
5	Muse Economic Development Zone Project	Special economic zone in Muse, Shan State
6	China-Myanmar Economic Corridor Transport Improvement Project (CMEC)	Project Transport projects within the CMEC

Source: Pascal et al. (2021)

Table 2 shows that most projects focus on transportation infrastructure and special economic zones. This is consistent with the BRI's goal of building transport routes connecting China with other countries, while also helping Myanmar's economic development and providing employment for Myanmar citizens. The projects are concentrated in western and northern Myanmar near the Chinese border, facilitating the transportation of goods and transport connectivity between the two countries. These tools have created a positive image of China among Myanmar people. China has steadily developed investment and trade in Myanmar in recent years, especially after the announcement of the BRI in 2014. From 1998 to 2010, China was Myanmar's largest trading partner (Pant, 2014). However, political fluctuations in Myanmar have resulted in changes in trade between the two countries from 2011 until now, but overall China remains one of Myanmar's largest and longest-standing trading partners.

Table 3: Myanmar's total trade turnover in 2022-2023 (April 2022 - March 2023)

No	Partner	Partner Total Trade Turnover with Myanmar
1	China	9.28 billion USD
2	Thailand	6 billion USD
3	Singapore	4.63 billion USD
4	Japan	1.52 billion USD
5	Malaysia	1.38 billion USD
6	India	1.36 billion USD
7	Indonesia	1.17 billion USD
8	United State	867 million USD
9	Germany	744 million USD
10	Spain	639 million USD
11	Other countries	6.38 billion USD
		Total: 34 billion USD

Source: SAC's Ministry of Commerce. (2023)

Table 3 shows that Myanmar's total trade turnover in 2022-2023 (April 2022 - March 2023) reached about 34 billion USD. Of which, China is the largest trading partner with 9.28 billion USD, accounting for over 27% of total trade turnover. Thailand is Myanmar's second largest partner with 6 billion USD, followed by Singapore with 4.63 billion USD. Myanmar's trade turnover with the top 10 partners reached over 27 billion USD, accounting for 81% of trade value. It is clear that China remains Myanmar's most important leading trading partner. The implementation of trade and investment agreements such as CMEC, linking infrastructure projects with BRI, as well as improving electricity networks between the two countries have been carried out by China (Vu, 2022). In addition, improving China's image through economic diplomacy has increased China's influence in Myanmar. China's ODA aid has become an important resource for the military and the country, especially during the period of economic sanctions. China wants to "consolidate" its relationship with Myanmar through investments and aid over time, while strengthening the signing of a series of important cooperation documents, including the Five-Year Plan for China-Myanmar Economic and Trade Cooperation Development, the Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation between the Chinese and Myanmar Governments, as well as China's provision of free emergency COVID-19 vaccine batches to Myanmar (Lwin, 2021). By "consolidating" its relationship through investments, aid, and the signing of important cooperation documents, China aims to solidify its economic presence and leverage in Myanmar, competing with India's economic cooperation efforts in the region.

Fourth, China uses military and defense cooperation to control Myanmar's security and enhance regional and international influence.

Sanctions and tensions between Myanmar and Western countries have created opportunities for China to continue being the leading partner in military and defense cooperation with Myanmar. Currently, China is Myanmar's main supplier of weapons, including fighter jets, armored vehicles, guns and ammunition, and naval vessels (An, 2017). Military and defense cooperation has become an important pillar in the relationship between the two countries. This relationship is maintained and developed through China's construction of military bases on Myanmar's Coco Islands in the Indian Ocean, near the border with India (Phung, 2011, p.181). This poses a threat to India's security and influence in the region and globally. With this strategic geographic location, China has long built its String of Pearls Strategy in the Indian Ocean region. In the past, China was a close ally of Myanmar, especially in the military and defense sphere. Although there have been some changes after Myanmar's political reforms, diversifying relationships has made Myanmar's defense relations more favorable and with more partners, leading to a decline in China's position in this field. However, Myanmar's military is still considered China's closest ally due to the close ties between Myanmar's military government and the country (Tan & Yoo, 2022).

In recent years, Myanmar-US foreign relations have not changed much, and the imposition of sanctions continues due to the Rohingya issue and the February 2021 coup which has hindered military and defense cooperation with countries, especially Western nations and allies. In this context, China has been actively raising its position and enhancing cooperation with Myanmar in the military and defense sphere. With its modern defense industry and major reforms, the increase of China's military power is an important premise for Myanmar-China cooperation in this field. The defense industry is one of China's key export sectors and Myanmar is a major export market. China transferred a submarine named UMS Minye Kyaw Htin to Myanmar in 2021. From 2010 to 2019, China sold \$1.3 billion worth of weapons to Myanmar (Voice of Vietnam Radio, 2021). Myanmar has received heavy weapons from China and the two countries have cooperated in training military forces. In January 2020, Myanmar and China signed 33 bilateral treaties under the BRI framework, including the Kyaukphyu deep seaport project and the railway project along the Economic Corridor connecting China's Southwest with the Indian Ocean (Thang, 2020, p.100). The Kyaukphyu deep seaport project is also located within the Cambodia-Myanmar Economic Corridor and is considered a strategic project in cooperation between the two countries, while enabling China to expand its influence and operations in the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean regions. Therefore, China-Myanmar security and

defense cooperation brings benefits to border security and China's regional and global strategies, especially maintaining a military presence, preventing and limiting India's influence in Myanmar. With its strategically important geopolitical position, Myanmar becomes a premise for China to enter Southeast Asia and South Asia, especially in the strategy of containing and preventing India's influence. In the context of increasing tensions and complex world developments, especially in the East Sea, China can limit India's intervention and monitoring of military activities in the region by "consolidating" relations with Myanmar.

5. Conclusion

The article has analyzed the geopolitical competition relationship between India and China in Myanmar. Through that, the author has identified the conflicts, clashes, and political-economic calculations between the two powers that have led to geopolitical competition in Myanmar, a country with an important geopolitical position for India-China in the Indian Ocean region. India has changed its attitude and approach to the Myanmar government since 1991 when it wanted to establish Myanmar's role as an intermediary point connecting India and ASEAN countries, while preventing the expansion of China's power scope down to South Asia and the Indian Ocean. For China, Myanmar is an extremely important country in the "Southbound" policy and "India Encirclement Strategy". Chinese leaders have used economic power and soft power to interfere in Myanmar's "internal" issues to increase influence and keep Myanmar within the control of the Beijing government. Therefore, since the 2021 coup in Myanmar, China has had an important advantage in geopolitical competition with India in Myanmar, as many observations suggest that China played an important role in supporting the military government in carrying out the coup against the civilian government when State Counsellor - Aung San Suu Kyi was trying to reduce dependence on China by enhancing cooperative relations with the US and Western allies, harming China's interests and strategies in this country.

Strategically, both China and India see Myanmar as a key point in the regional influence competition strategy. However, China's strategy is more proactive, flexible and creative. Through economic and diplomatic policies, China has actively penetrated Myanmar very early in the late 20th century. Meanwhile, India's strategy has been more passive, only more active in recent years to counter China. In terms of economic power and comprehensive strength, China is also far superior to India, which gives China more tools and options to influence and pull Myanmar into its "orbit". However, Myanmar's historical, cultural and geographical proximity to India is New Delhi's big advantage over Beijing. For Myanmar, balancing between India and China will still be a long-term trend in foreign policy if it wants to maintain strategic autonomy. However, the trend of siding with China may be stronger as it is becoming a leading global superpower. This poses a major challenge for India in implementing strategies in Myanmar in particular as well as in competing with China in general. In the future, strategic competition between China and India in Myanmar will become increasingly fierce. As a country with an important geopolitical position, Myanmar will be increasingly drawn into the vortex of competition between the two rising powers in the India Ocean region. To maintain independence and strategic autonomy, Myanmar needs to strengthen cooperation with other countries in the region and internationally. At the same time, Myanmar also needs to accelerate the democratization process, political stability and economic development to increase the country's comprehensive power. Overall, strategic competition between China and India in Myanmar will continue to be prolonged and fierce in the future. The outcome of this competition will profoundly affect regional security and Myanmar's international standing.

6. Acknowledgment

This research is funded by Ministry of Education and Training (Vietnam) under grant number B2023-DHH-05.

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