

Myanmar's President U Win Myint along with the First Lady Daw Cho Cho, paid a State Visit to India from 26 to 29 February 2020. They were accompanied by a 26 Member Delegation, including the Chief Minister of the Western state of Rakhine.

President U Win Myint and the Myanmar delegation also visited places of historical and cultural importance, including Bodh Gaya and Agra. The visit reinforced the tradition of high-level interactions, symbolizing the strong friendly relations existing between the two neighbours.

Held extensive talks with Mr. U Win Myint, the President of Myanmar. Discussed ways to expand bilateral cooperation in various sectors.

[pic.twitter.com/aYC60iVRND](https://pic.twitter.com/aYC60iVRND)

— Narendra Modi (@narendramodi) [February 27, 2020](#)

Prime Minister Modi and President Myint later held talks at Hyderabad House and 10 agreements were [signed between the two countries](#). During the interactions, the leaders discussed a wide range of bilateral, regional and international issues of common interest. They emphasized that regular high-level interactions have added momentum to bilateral relations. They welcomed the synergies between Myanmar's independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy and India's '[Act East](#)' and 'Neighbourhood First' policies, and reaffirmed their commitments to further strengthen partnership, explore new avenues of cooperation in order to expand bilateral relations for the mutual benefit of the two countries and people.

PM Modi expressed full support for Myanmar's peace process between Government, Military and Ethnic Armed Groups. Co-operation in defence and security along with the matter of enhanced bilateral trade and economic engagements were also discussed. Both sides also agreed to cooperate in countering terrorist groups. The focus of many agreements was on development projects under India's assistance, particularly in the conflict-torn Rakhine state. The agreements included an MoU on 'Cooperation for Prevention of Trafficking in Persons; Rescue, Recovery, Repatriation and Re-Integration of Victims of Trafficking'.

☐☐ India Myanmar ☐☐

Ten Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs)/Agreements were exchanged during the visit. [pic.twitter.com/CcThycA7aN](https://pic.twitter.com/CcThycA7aN)

— India in Myanmar (@IndiainMyanmar) [February 27, 2020](#)

The two sides emphasized the centrality of connectivity in their relationship with the commitment of coordinated Bus Service between Imphal and Mandalay which is expected to begin from April this year. The Indian side reiterated its commitment Welcoming the opening of the two land border crossing points at Tamu-Moreh and Rihkhawdar-Zowkhawthar as international border gates, construction of the modern Integrated Check Post as Phase-I at Tamu and proposed to settle pending issues through the existing bilateral mechanisms, such as the Joint Boundary Working Group Meeting.

Both leaders took note of the positive developments in the socio-economic sector and also agreed to explore the creation of an India-Myanmar digital payment gateway which would help expand options for cross border remittance between the two countries. Further, the two sides agreed to continue their close cooperation at international fora such as the United Nations (UN) and other international organizations and India also welcomed the inclusion of Bagan in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

The two sides noted the need to make efforts to enhance bilateral trade and economic engagement to their full potential. They noted that steps such as improving connectivity, market access, easing financial transactions, facilitating business-to-business connect and enabling bilateral and regional trading agreements would contribute to the socio-economic development of both sides. Both sides reiterated their strong commitment to further consolidate friendly and amicable bilateral ties between the two countries and agreed to intensify engagements at all levels in future.

### **Visit to maintain its strategic autonomy?**

Last month, Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a momentous visit to Myanmar, in an attempt to speed-up the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) and its strategic gain. During the visit, Beijing signed 33 documents, most of which were proposals.



India-Myanmar Bilateral Army Exercise (IMBAX) on United Nations Peace Keeping culminated at Joint Training Node, Umroi in Meghalaya -2017/ Image: Eastern Command

New Delhi is still far away in forging the level of economic ties, Beijing is offering Naypyidaw. However, the knowledge exchange and joint military cooperation is a distinctive approach by India to gain grounds in its East. Myanmar highly values India's Defence cooperation and recently purchased Russian-made *Kilo* submarines from Indian Navy, upgraded armaments. In fact, Myanmar sees New Delhi as a knowledge exchange centre and a window to the West.

Amara Thila, Senior Research Manager at the Myanmar Institute for Peace & Security (MIPS), in his column for Diplomat Magazine, opines,

*“The strategic military-to-military partnership between New Delhi and the Tatmadaw creates space for Myanmar to adhere to a core principle, an independent and active foreign policy, by giving an alternative to China for*

*Myanmar to engage with."*

## Where India Stands

The Strategic location of Myanmar enables it to open doors for India and South Asia to the ASEAN countries. Connectivity is the keyword here. India and Myanmar are planning for connectivity at several fronts, i.e. Rail, Road, Air & Sea. However, the work has remained very slow on both the sides, whether it's pending bilateral Motor Vehicles Agreement to facilitate cross border movement of vehicles or establishment of the *border haats* which was agreed by both the sides in 2012.



India-Myanmar Friendship Bridge/ Image: Forsvaret

Colonel Jaideep Chanda, Senior Fellow at Vivekananda International Foundation, [in his brief](#) points, the timely and efficient delivery of all these projects as one of the major caveats in the success of India-Myanmar relations. He opines,

*"India is fighting a running battle on two fronts, one internally and the other externally, to improve its implementation of these projects and jettison the dubious perception it has acquired over non-delivery of bilateral projects, respectively. Till the time the Indian Government machinery does not deliver the projects, the initiative taken our diplomats all across the world, will not fructify. Hence the era of large projects going over decades with innumerable cost and*

*time overruns should be reviewed and the Government of India's capacity to execute such projects be kept in mind. Concurrently, it should develop the capability to ensure guaranteed execution of the projects agreed upon, bilaterally."*

## Conclusion

India & Myanmar shares a lot common in between. But India's initial negligence towards the North East region has made Myanmar a milestone. Myanmar has been facing internal conflicts for a long time, which is another reason for the loosely-structured relations. However, the time is ripe and India has made some tremendous developments in the North East region in the last decade, connectivity and people to people contact will open a thousand doors to enhance the relations.

Another reason is the media and popular culture, which plays a big role in connecting people. Indians are obsessed with the west due to developing Anglophonic culture. Myanmar President's visit met a blindspot by the Indian mainstream media. It's even rare when we talk about the popular culture, Myanmar's culture or tourist destinations find a rare space in it. In fact, Bollywood, India's prime entertainment industry is only limited to the historical movies/series based on WW2. A soft power to promote relations in India's North-Eastern neighbour is a much-needed step in boosting Indo-Myanmar ties

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