

## **GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF MYANMAR\***

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### **Abstract**

Myanmar's geographical situation is strategically significant in considering foreign policy and foreign relations. In accordance with its geographical profile and position, Myanmar can hardly be ignored as strategically important for regional powers and players like China and India. Being situated between two big neighbouring powers, Myanmar attempts to navigate its strategic importance in line with its geopolitical context. This study will focus on the explanation revolved around the concepts of pivot and gateway that reflects the strategic significance. The main objectives of this paper are to examine the strategic significance of Myanmar from a geopolitical perspective and to provide a better understanding of Myanmar's strategic importance and its nature. Specifically, the questions of this paper are what factors explain the strategic significance of Myanmar in its geopolitical context, and how does geostrategy of Myanmar play a crucial role in positioning itself favorably among geopolitical players like China and India. This study found that Myanmar's geostrategic position and geostrategy identify whether it is a favorable or a menace to its national interests in line with the geopolitical context by navigating its strategic role in the geopolitical context.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy, Geostrategy, Strategic Significant, Pivot, Gateway

### **Introduction**

Myanmar's geostrategic situation is strategically significant in the Southeast Asia region. It is the largest state in mainland Southeast Asia and is bordered by the five neighbouring countries: Bangladesh, China, India, Laos and Thailand, as well as by the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Its land boundary is adjacent to five countries, including two strategic giants, China and India. India is a nuclear power that dominates the South Asian subcontinent; on the other hand, China is reaching global power status. In accordance with its geographical profile and position, Myanmar can hardly be ignored as strategically important for regional countries like China and India. This paper aims to examine the strategic significance of Myanmar from a geopolitical perspective and to provide a better understanding on the nature of Myanmar's strategic importance. Specifically, this paper sought answer to questions such as: what factors explain the strategic significance of Myanmar in its geopolitical context, and how does geostrategy of Myanmar play a crucial role in positioning itself favorably among geopolitical players. The pivot and gateway are the two key geopolitical concepts needed to accomplish the research objective and the research questions. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method, and secondary data will be used. Based on this background, this study composed of five portions including introduction and conclusion parts. Firstly, it explains overview on the geopolitical characteristics of pivot and gateway concepts. Secondly, it examines Myanmar's geographical profile and its significant briefly. Finally, it assesses China and India's geopolitical ambitions to Myanmar by identifying the Myanmar's foreign policy considerations and its geostrategy.

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## **Overview on Pivot and Gateway: Geopolitical Characteristics and Significance**

Halford Mackinder initially used the term “pivot” in the early 1900s, and he stated that the pivot is not a state as much as it is a region occupied by an important power. Later, this term is used for the various incarnations that refer to different security roles for the countries and regions that have been politically and physically involved in the context of great power disputes. He assumed that the state's geographic position made itself a geopolitical pivot that could deny major powers access to resources or vital areas.

As for the concept “pivot”, Brzezinski (1997) also stated “Geopolitical pivots are the states whose importance is derived not from their power and motivation but rather from their sensitive location and from the consequences of their potentially vulnerable condition for the behavior of geostrategic players”. In addition, Sweijis, T., et al. (2014) stated that “Pivot states possess military, economic or ideational strategic assets that are coveted by great powers. They are caught in the middle of overlapping spheres of influence of these great powers. A change in a pivot state’s association has important repercussions for regional and global security.”

In explaining the geopolitical pivot, making considerations on the role of the players who wish to project its power or interest around the pivot is also important. From the perspective of Brzezinski’s aspects, the four major powers in the Indo-Pacific region are the United States, China, Russia, and India, of which the regional major powers are China and India, considered “geostrategic players.” He defined the geostrategic players who project its power around the pivot as “Active geostrategic players are the states that have the capacity and the national will to exercise power or influence beyond their borders in order to alter the existing geopolitical state of affairs. They have the potential and/or the predisposition to be geopolitically volatile.”

Concerning players around the pivot, Sweijis, T., et al. (2014) pointed out that role of pivot states in regional and global security and stability is very important because of their geostrategic position and strategic goods. If the position of pivot states is shifted, regional peace, stability, and balance of power can be upset. They stated that “Pivot states are critical points around which great powers’ actions revolve and they can pivot or wings round from one great power or another or, merely as pawns in the schemes of great powers who shape the security environment through policies.”

The influence of great powers in pivotal states can cause conflicts that are difficult to resolve and turn into harmful stalemates. When great powers encroach on each other’s spheres of influence, pivot states will fall victim to them. Pivot states can create durable and close-knit relationships with great powers through ties that bind, which consist of military treaties and trade agreements, as they can build bridges and gateways between different great powers. Pivot states can have more peaceful and friendly relations with the key regional security actors by changing their behavior. If the policymakers of pivot states understand their important roles and formulate policies well, they will shape their security environment.

Another geopolitical concept is gateway also known as bridge countries. For reasons of security, investments, and energy-industrial resources, these countries or regions encourage outside or external power’s entry into and through them into more expansive regions and continents. Brzezinski, for instance, perceived Western Europe as “the crucial geopolitical pivot point between the United States and the Eurasian continent,” whereas Saul Cohen, an American geographer, envisioned these regions as epicenters of commerce and finance.

Gateway states play a novel role in linking different parts of the world by facilitating the exchange of peoples, goods, and ideas in the overall context of their strategic economic locations or in the adaptability of their inhabitants to economic opportunities. They are distinct politically and culturally and may often have separate languages or religions as well as relatively high degrees of education and favorable access to external areas by land or sea. The gateways function as the transmission belts connecting the regional and global levels. Gateway states serve as crucial intermediaries in connecting different parts or regions of the world by enabling the exchange of people, commodities, and idea in the context of their strategically advantageous economic positions or in the ability of their residents to react to economic possibilities. If the gateway role is complemented by political power or hegemony, the respective state will be the core or the central entity of a geopolitical region.

These two geopolitical concepts: pivot and gateway are relevance to explain in assessing Myanmar strategic significance in dealing with its neighbouring states like China and India which are identified as the geostrategic players.

### **Myanmar's Geographical Profile and its Significance**

Myanmar's geostrategic location at the tri-junction of East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia is important for the major powers like China and India in the region. Myanmar possesses a long coastline and is also one of the littoral states of the India Ocean. From a strategic point of view, Myanmar is located on routes that go from the Indian Ocean to the Southwest sea to China. Moreover, it has influence upon the sea approaches of Bangladesh and the West and Southwest of Thailand and hence possesses a commanding position. Myanmar's territories in the Bay of Bengal and the Adaman Sea are sensitive spots because their position is closed to the commercial lanes. Furthermore, strategic consideration on the security of the India Ocean and the competition for the control of it by the regional powers for their own military and economic stratagem more or less, affects the security and diplomatic relations of Myanmar. For geostrategic perspective, being situated between two most populous nations: China and India, Myanmar has a key linchpin in relations between these two giant rival states. In addition, Myanmar's strategic position at the crossroads of South Asia and Southeast Asia has bestowed it with a dual role in Southeast Asian geopolitics.

Myanmar can be considered as a geopolitical pivot because it could dictate the behaviour of geostrategic players like China and India at one point or another. For Brzezinsk, active geostrategic actors possess the capability and determination of their national wills to exert power or influence beyond their territorial boundaries to alter the existing geopolitical status. China can be identified as an active geopolitical and global player. India can be solidified its position as a regional power, a potentially significant global actor, a competitor to China and a regional hegemon in South Asia. Furthermore, it operates as a nuclear power, which it acquired not only to intimidate Pakistan but also to counterbalance China's possession of nuclear arsenal. India has a geostrategic vision on its regional position in dealing with its relationships with neighbouring countries and its influence in the Indian Ocean.

## **China and India's Geopolitical Ambitions in Myanmar**

### ***China Geopolitical Ambitions***

Being situated between the active geostrategic players, the two asymmetric neighbouring states, China and India, their strategic considerations and geopolitical ambitions become crucial in Myanmar's external interactions. Based on their geopolitical ambitions and strategic considerations, Myanmar's geopolitical situation can be considered a pivot and gateway.

In assessing China's geopolitical ambition in Myanmar, this paper mainly focus on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's Two Ocean Strategy. The BRI, is also known as One Belt One Road (OBOR) "the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup> century Maritime Silk Road, and it was announced by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in October 2013. The primary goal of BRI is to promote trade and connectivity between Europe, Africa, and Asia. In line with its geostrategic nature, economic security is at the core of BRI's new national security concept. If its ambitions were to be achieved, it would shape the global geoeconomic order. In the military dimension, it would address China's economic security concerns, including the imperative to ensure the stability of oil supplies and the safety of SLOCs. China has undertaken its geostrategic aspirations in a systematic manner, that is starting with economic expansion and later bolstering it with a naval presence or access. These endeavours mostly focus on protecting China's economic interests.

As for China, the Indian Ocean has distinct geopolitical significant because it is vital for China's geopolitical ambition of Two Ocean Strategy. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to gain the political influence over both the Pacific and the India Oceans for power balancing to its adversaries in the Asia-Pacific Region. It also aims to expand and project its power regionally and globally. China's vision of increasing commercial and logistical interests in the Indian Ocean supports its goals to become a more powerful force in the far seas. The OBOR initiative proposed by Xi Jinping defined the geopolitical scope of the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) mission in the Indo-Pacific region. As a result, it is being incorporated into the navy's operation of Two Ocean Strategy. People's Liberation Army (PLA) analysts discussed about the necessity to establish a "pearl chain" extending towards the Indian Ocean and other regions. This concept diverges from the commonly referred to string of pearls strategy. The pearl chain primarily focuses on establishing secure logistical support locations for the growing number of PLAN warships transiting through the area, while the string of pearls strategy is more focused on combat-oriented involving deployment of strategic navy and air force assets for significant blue water operations.

In this context, Myanmar's geographic location and geopolitical reality become distinct in China's strategic framework. Myanmar plays a crucial role for BRI, which is China's ambitious infrastructure project in the 21st century. The most of BRI projects in Myanmar were formally agreed upon during President Xi's visit to Myanmar in 2020. In the context of BRI projects for connecting China's southwestern interior to the Indian Ocean, Myanmar possesses geographically pivotal position.

Myanmar's geographical location, which borders China and has direct access to the Indian Ocean, makes it a significant country where China's two important geopolitical goals, the 'Two-Ocean' and the 'String of Pearls' strategies, intersect. China's BRI projects in Myanmar are economically and geopolitically significant particularly the Kyaukphyu Deep Sea Port as an

example. This port is of great importance to China's extensive economic and geopolitical interests, as well as its strategic plans.

### ***India's Geopolitical Ambition***

The Indian Ocean region functions as a highly important hub for both global trade and the transportation of essential energy resources. India's control of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands strengthens its position as a regional power. In these islands, India's military presence includes port facilities and air bases and has a significant influence on the balance of power in the Indian Ocean region. In dealing with military and security concerns, China's military presence and its power projection in the Indian Ocean region are critical for India. For instance, China's String of the Pearls' strategy in the Indian Ocean has strategically encircled India by establishing military and commercial outposts in the region. This strategy aims to encompass India's neighbouring countries in China's strategic orbit and simulate India's motivation to counterbalance strategies with China. In this context, Myanmar, the geostrategically vital neighbour of China, came under India's strategic considerations.

Myanmar's long coastline on the India Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, as well as its proximity to the Andaman and Nicobar islands, make India's relationship with Myanmar of vital importance for the security of these islands and India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal. Safeguarding India's territorial integrity in its distant North-Eastern area, situated between Bangladesh, Bhutan, Tibet Autonomous province of China and Myanmar, is crucial for India, North East region is geographically distant from India's core area. If Myanmar is hostile towards India or strategically influenced by China, it would be extremely difficult to maintain the North-East States as part of India. As for India, Myanmar's proactive collaboration is essential for the elimination of the persistent insurgencies in the North-Eastern states. Therefore, the immense strategic importance of Myanmar for India's territorial integrity in the distant Northeast becomes obvious.

India implemented its Look East Policy (LEP) in the early 1990s to strengthen its economic ties and diplomatic engagement with the prosperous economies of Southeast Asia. India's economic and diplomatic engagement with Southeast Asia, as well as its broader security and defence relations across the Asia-Pacific region, greatly influenced its international relations. Additionally, this kind of international relations strategy served as a driving factor for India's strategy of external balancing against China. LEP significantly influenced India's involvement in the Asia-Pacific region for more than twenty years and also strengthened India's economic, institutional, and security connections. In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi elevated the LEP to 'Act East Policy (AEP)' to strengthen India's active and influential strategic position in East and Southeast Asia. It also signifies the long-term economic and strategic advantages of fostering deeper ties with the Asia-Pacific region. Specifically, while China strengthens its ties with India's neighbouring countries in the Indian Ocean, the strategic importance of India's linkages with adjacent Asian nations in the Pacific Ocean also increases.

The 1600-kilometre India-Myanmar border serves as a gateway to Southeast Asia. The seven states of India's Northeast—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura—represent India's physical presence in the eastern region. In addition to these geographical considerations, the successive governments in India have recognized the need

to prioritizes the Northeast region as the main beneficiary by implementing an effective programme. Hence, the Indian government prioritizes commerce and infrastructure development as crucial elements for the development of border areas.

The North-Eastern states are the sole sustainable foundation for India's internal security and stability in the long run. Complete and extensive economic collaboration with Myanmar is absolutely necessary to guarantee this. In terms of the Northeast region, Myanmar has historically been a more economically viable option for these northeastern states to obtain consumer goods and daily necessities. This is preferable to relying on the costly, time-consuming transportation of these goods from other parts of India. Myanmar's proactive collaboration is essential for the eradication of the persistent insurgencies in the north-eastern states. Myanmar serves as the sole terrestrial connection linking India and the ASEAN nations. Indian authorities should regard India's North-East as the starting point of Southeast Asia. Consequently, Myanmar has a crucial position and significance as gateway for India's strategic approach to East and Southeast Asia.

### **Myanmar's Foreign Policy Considerations and its Geostrategy**

In identifying Myanmar's geopolitical situation as a pivot and gateway for two neighbouring geostrategic players, the formulation of Myanmar's geostrategy plays essential role to enhance its national interests in dealing with China and India.

According to Grygiel, J. J. (2006), the term geostrategy refers to the geographical direction of a nation's foreign policy. Geostrategy denotes to the deliberate allocation of a state's resources and efforts towards the projection of military force and the direction of diplomatic activities. The geostrategy of a state is based on ideological reasons, interest groups, or simply the whims of its leader.

Regarding the foreign policy in its external relations, Article 41 of the 2008 Constitution of Myanmar states that 'the Union practices independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy aimed at world peace and friendly relations with nations and upholds the principles of peaceful co-existence among nations'. Myanmar practices the Independent and Active Foreign Policy in accordance with the following principles:

- (1) respect of and adherence to the principle of equality among peoples and among nations and the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence;
- (2) taking a non-aligned, independent and just stand in international issues;
- (3) maintaining friendly relations with all nations, and good-neighbourly relations with neighbouring countries;
- (4) continued support of, and active participation in, the United Nations and its affiliated organizations;
- (5) pursuance of mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral cooperation programmes;
- (6) regional consultation and beneficial cooperation in regional economic and social affairs;

- (7) active participation in the maintenance of international peace and security and the creation of an equitable economic order and opposition to imperialism, colonialism, intervention, aggression and hegemonism;
- (8) acceptance of foreign assistance which is beneficial to national development, provided there are no strings attached.

The fundamental principles of Myanmar's foreign policy had formulated in the 1950s. The implementation of its principles laid an indispensable role in effectively handling the nation's security issues. The foreign policy strategy of Myanmar and its diplomatic orientation can be characterized as 'diversified' during the AFPFL era and as 'isolationist' during the Revolutionary Council era. By the mid-1970s, the foreign policy of "isolationism" was discarded but the extent of openness and diversification in its foreign relations was far from determined. The Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) government prioritized the self-reliance principle by maintaining limited engagement with the international community. The country maintained an equal distance in its relationship with both superpowers, as well as with neighboring big powers like China and India.

According to some observers and foreign policy experts, Myanmar's foreign policy stance could depend on China, as both sides had strengthened their relations based on strategic imperatives and Myanmar perceived escalation of Chinese influence within the nation. Therefore, to maintain its 'independent, active, and non-aligned' foreign policy and to avoid excessive dependence on China, Myanmar utilized its geographical position and its natural resources as key assessors in its diplomatic manipulations. In the early 2000s, Myanmar bolstered its ties with Russia, primarily through arms sales, in order to gain an alternative veto power apart from China at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). In addition, Myanmar enhanced its relations with India, Japan and other regional countries. In 2011, the USDP government implemented a foreign policy approach that carefully manages the strategic interests of the major powers within the country. This approach primarily focuses on maintaining amicable relations with near and far, while also prioritizing multilateralism through regional cooperation and institutions. The NLD administration committed to the "independent, active, and non-aligned foreign policy" by realizing the reality of great-power politics and the country's security needs. It delicately practiced balancing her relations with China, Japan, the United States and the European Union.

Myanmar's foreign policy has primarily been neutral and non-aligned since its independence, aiming to heal colonial pains and avoid a bipolar international order. Myanmar's foreign policy has been significantly influenced by its geographical, historical and influenced by domestic political factors Myanmar collaboratively seeks to maintain friendly relations with neighbouring countries and with those in the international arena. The geopolitical context of the country has a crucial role in shaping Myanmar's foreign policy. The political elites in Myanmar recognize that their country is situated between two densely populated states, China and India. They are aware of the geopolitical reality of the asymmetry of power between Myanmar and two neighbouring states. Therefore, what has greater significance for the Myanmar government is not only the size and population of these countries but also their geopolitical interests and influence in the region.

The long-standing distrust between China and India enhances the mutual suspicion, while they assume that the geopolitical reality of Myanmar as pivot and gateway for their strategic

considerations in dealing with India Ocean and the Bay of Bengal (BoB) as a significant battleground in their rivalry for energy resources, maritime routes etc. The two countries extend their regional influence into each other's neighboring areas in which Myanmar is strategically important. The rivalry between China and India in the context of Myanmar mainly concerned with their border regions, India's North East and China's South West Yunnan province that are adjacent to Myanmar. These regions are economically weak and both China and India have respective economic and strategic plans for the development of these regions.

As a component of BRI, China and Myanmar signed the MoU for the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) in September 2018. The corridor, spanning approximately 1,700 kilometers, will connect Kunming, the capital of China's Yunnan Province, and Myanmar's key commercial checkpoints via Mandalay in central Myanmar, and then extend eastward to Yangon and westward to the Kyaukphyu Special Commercial Zone (SEZ). Under the MoU, the governments agree to collaborate on various sectors, including basic infrastructure, construction, manufacturing, agriculture, transport, finance, and human resources. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, 1,300 km long, connects Moreh in Manipur, India, and Mae Sot in Thailand, passing through Myanmar. In 2018, to enhance connectivity with Myanmar, the Moreh-Tamu land route was operated. The Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project encompasses a convergence of land, river, and sea routes by connecting the Kolkata port in India and the Sittwe port in Myanmar. Additionally, it can establish a connection between Sittwe and Paletwa in Myanmar via the Kaladan River and can connect Paletwa to Mizoram, India.

In identifying the geopolitical reality of Myanmar as pivot and gateway by two asymmetric neighbours, understanding the geostrategy of Myanmar become essential. When pivot states endure encroachment by big powers into each other's spheres of influence, the likelihood of power confrontation and conflict increases. Major powers can rival for controlling different kinds of interests in areas by frequently utilizing a strategy known as brinkmanship, either to alter or to maintain the status quo. In this context, pivotal states can also competent at taking part in brinkmanship. It can be considered as rouge pivot if they behave irresponsibly while depending on the opposing major power to intervene and rescue them.

The strategic manipulation of pivot states also presents a legitimate risk of direct or indirect conflict between great powers. This approach seems clear: refrain from becoming the pivotal state to entangle in a significant battle. This kind of strategic maneuvering can be seen in Myanmar's geostrategy and its foreign policy practicing circle. Positioned between two formidable neighboring countries, China and India, every Myanmar diplomats and foreign policy commentators consistently asserts that Myanmar has pursued a deliberate strategy of maintaining equidistance from both nations

## **Conclusion**

All in all, this study realized that the determinant factors for Myanmar strategic significance are mainly based on the existence of its geographic position in favorable tactical position among neighbouring states. Due to the two asymmetric neighbouring powers' strategic considerations and their geostrategy in practice, the geopolitical reality of Myanmar can be identified as a pivot and gateway. In studying the nature of the pivot position, it is not permanent. The policy formation and geostrategy of the pivot state determine whether it will change to a



rouge pivot or not. Changing to a rouge pivot or brinksmanship will have implications for regional security. In implementing its geostrategy, Myanmar utilized its geographical position as key assessors in its diplomatic manipulations. In general, every successive Myanmar governments' policy practices and geostrategy in dealing with two asymmetric neighbours can be assessed as not one-sided although there were very close ties with China during 1988–2010. But this administration also diversified its foreign relations to some extent. In the context of the geopolitical reality of Myanmar, the manifestation of rivalry between two asymmetric neighbouring states is mainly concerned with their border regions: India's North East and China's South West Yunnan province. Myanmar diversified its relations by cooperating both China's BRI programs and CMEC and India's Mulit transport projects. It is found that Myanmar's geostrategic position and geostrategy identify whether it is a favorable or a menace to its national interests in line with the geopolitical context by navigating its strategic role in the geopolitical context.

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