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India's Road Through Myanmar is One of Engagement

Context

- Myanmar's President U Min Aung Hlaing visited India from May 30 to June 3, 2026 — his first visit in his capacity as President.
- Before arriving in New Delhi for talks, he stopped at the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya — a deliberate civilisational signal.
- This article argues that India's decision to engage the Myanmar military government — despite its controversial 2021 coup — is driven by geography, strategic necessity, and the inescapable reality of China.

Why India Chose Engagement Over Isolation

- The world's democracies largely turned their backs on Myanmar after the February 2021 coup that ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government. Western nations imposed sanctions and sought to isolate the military junta.
- India chose a different path. Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri stated plainly that India's policy is "not intended to be a commentary on the internal political arrangements" in Myanmar.

- This was realpolitik dressed as pragmatism — and there are three compelling reasons behind it.
 - **Geography first.** Myanmar shares a **1,643 km border with four of India's northeastern states** — Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram. An unstable or hostile Myanmar is a direct security threat to India's most sensitive and fragile border region.
 - **Act East and Neighbourhood First.** Myanmar is India's only land bridge to Southeast Asia. Without a stable, cooperative Myanmar, India's ambitions to integrate its northeast with the ASEAN economies remain geographically stranded.
 - **The China factor.** Since the coup, Beijing has aggressively stepped into the vacuum left by Western withdrawal — providing infrastructure financing, arms supplies, and diplomatic cover to Naypyidaw. For India to disengage entirely would be to hand China a free pass in its own backyard.

The Infrastructure Stakes: Two Corridors, Two Delays

- Two connectivity projects dominated the Modi-Hlaing agenda, and both tell a story of ambition delayed by conflict.
- **The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project**
 - This project connects **Kolkata to Sittwe** (Rakhine State) by sea, then follows the Kaladan River inland to Paletwa, before linking by road to Zorinpui in Mizoram.
 - The sea and river components are operational — the first cargo shipment reached Sittwe in May 2023.
 - But the critical 109 km Paletwa-Zorinpui road through mountainous, flood-prone Chin State remains incomplete. Full operationalisation is now targeted for 2027.
- **India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway**
 - This carries an even grander vision: linking **Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand** through roughly 1,360 km of Myanmar, with planned extensions to Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Vietnam.
 - Once complete, it could transform India's landlocked northeast into a true gateway to Southeast Asia. It was supposed to be finished by 2019. It still is not.
 - The reason for both delays is the same: Myanmar's internal armed conflict. Armed groups control large stretches of territory along both corridors, making construction dangerous and unpredictable.

Beyond Infrastructure: Trade, Security, and People

- The summit covered significant ground beyond connectivity.
- **Trade** stood at \$1.95 billion in 2025-26. Both sides agreed to increase it through **a rupee-kyat settlement mechanism** — reducing dependence on dollar transactions. Discussions also covered critical minerals and rare-earth cooperation — an area of growing strategic importance for India.
- **Security** was equally significant. President Hlaing reiterated Myanmar's assurance that its territory would not be used against India's interests — a crucial pledge given the long presence of Indian insurgent groups and cybercrime networks in Myanmar's border regions.
- **Cybercrime and trafficking** have emerged as a new bilateral concern. More than 2,400 Indian nationals have been rescued from scam centres in Myanmar through bilateral cooperation over the past 18 months —

though many remain trapped.

- **Education** received attention too. India announced an increase in **Mekong-Ganga ICCR** scholarships for Myanmar students from 36 to 100 annually from 2026 — a soft power investment in the bilateral relationship.

The Larger Reckoning

- By receiving Hlaing as Myanmar's President, India has signalled a measured acceptance of political reality — **not an endorsement** of the military government, **but a recognition** that meaningful engagement requires working with whoever holds power.
- For Myanmar, the choice of India for Hlaing's first major bilateral visit abroad as head of state is itself telling.
- It signals a deliberate effort to cultivate a relationship that can provide diplomatic and economic counterweight to overwhelming dependence on China.
- For India, the calculus is rooted in geography, security, and the historical lesson that disengagement rarely produces better outcomes than engagement.
- Pragmatic engagement, however uncomfortable, may increasingly define how the region deals with Myanmar.

Conclusion

- India's Myanmar policy is not about comfort — it is about calculus. In a neighbourhood where China fills every vacuum, New Delhi's choice to engage is less an endorsement of the junta and more a refusal to be strategically outmanoeuvred on its own border.

India's Road Through Myanmar is One of Engagement FAQs

Q1. Why has India chosen engagement over isolation in dealing with Myanmar?

Ans. India prioritises border security, regional connectivity, and strategic competition with China, making engagement with Myanmar more practical than diplomatic isolation.

Q2. Why is Myanmar important for India's Act East Policy?

Ans. Myanmar serves as India's only land bridge to Southeast Asia, making it essential for connectivity, trade integration, and economic engagement with ASEAN countries.

Q3. What are the major connectivity projects between India and Myanmar?

Ans. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway are key initiatives aimed at improving regional connectivity and trade.

Q4. How has internal conflict in Myanmar affected India's projects?

Ans. Armed conflicts and territorial control by insurgent groups have delayed infrastructure construction, increasing costs and slowing project implementation timelines.

Q5. How does China influence India's Myanmar policy?

Ans. China's growing economic, diplomatic, and strategic presence in Myanmar encourages India to maintain engagement and prevent Beijing from dominating the region.

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