

India – Myanmar Relations: Notes for UPSC GS2

India's relations with other countries, especially neighbouring ones are an important part of the International Relations syllabus of the UPSC exam. In this article, we discuss the relations between India and her eastern neighbour Myanmar for the civil services exam.

Background of India Myanmar Relations UPSC

India-Myanmar relations are rooted in shared historical, ethnic, cultural and religious ties. As the land of Lord Buddha, India is a country of pilgrimage for the people of Myanmar. India and Myanmar relations have stood the test of time. The geographical proximity of the two countries has helped develop and sustain cordial relations and facilitated people-to-people contact. India and Myanmar share a long land border of over 1600 km and a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal. A large population of Indian origin (according to some estimates about 2.5 million) lives in Myanmar.

India and Myanmar signed a Treaty of Friendship in 1951. The visit of the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1987 laid the foundations for a stronger relationship between India and Myanmar. A number of agreements enhancing bilateral Cooperation have been signed between the two countries. Institutional mechanisms for facilitating regular dialogue on a range of issues of bilateral interest have also been established.

During 2002, the Indian Consulate General in Mandalay was reopened and the Consulate General of Myanmar was set up in Kolkata. Following the cataclysmic cyclone 'Nargis' which hit Myanmar in May 2008, India responded immediately with relief materials and offers of assistance. India also provided assistance of US \$1 million for humanitarian relief and rehabilitation in the areas affected by the severe earthquake in Shan State in March 2011.

.Why is Myanmar important to India?

Myanmar is important to India from a geopolitical point of view as it geographically stands at the crossroads of India-Southeast relations. Myanmar is the only Southeast Asian country that shares a land border with northeastern India, stretching some 1,624 kilometers. The neighbors also share a 725-km maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal.

Being the only country that sits at the intersection of India's "Neighborhood First" policy and its "Look East" policy, Myanmar is an essential element in India's practice of regional diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific, and serves as a land bridge to connect South Asia and Southeast Asia. In recognition of this importance, Myanmar was given the status of observer in SAARC in August 2008.

It is therefore in India's interest to see Myanmar prevail as a stable and autonomous country, thereby making possible greater bilateral engagement in India-Myanmar relations.

The 5 B's: A bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia, Myanmar has loomed large on India's diplomatic horizon. Blending business, culture and diplomacy, there is a strong connect between the two countries. **Buddhism, Business, Bollywood, Bharatnatyam and Burma teak**-- these are the five Bs that frame India-Myanmar relations in popular imagination. Moving beyond this rich configuration, the relations are now acquiring greater economic weight and strategic orientation. The talks in Nay Pyi Taw, the new capital of Myanmar, has set the stage for Prime Minister Modi's visit to the Southeast Asian country in November for the India-ASEAN summit and East Asia Summit. The importance of Myanmar for India is all-too-obvious: India and Myanmar share a long land border of over 1600 km and a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal.

Major Indian Projects in Myanmar

The Government of India is actively involved in over a dozen projects in Myanmar, both in infrastructural and non-infrastructural areas. These include upgradation and resurfacing of the 160 km. long Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo road; construction and upgradation of the Rhi-Tiddim Road in Myanmar; the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project; etc.

An ADSL project for high speed data link in 32 Myanmar cities has been completed by TCIL. ONGC Videsh Ltd. (OVL), GAIL and ESSAR are participants in the energy sector in Myanmar. M/s RITES is involved in development of the rail transportation system and in supply of railway coaches, locos and parts.

In September 2008, Ministry of Electric Power-1 (MoEP-1) and NHPC signed an agreement for development of the Tamanthi and Shwezaye Hydro-Electric Power project in Chindwin River valley and NHPC submitted the updated DPR on Tamanthi and is working on the DPR on the Shwezaye project. A heavy turbo-truck assembly plant set up in Myanmar by TATA Motors with GOI financial assistance was inaugurated on December 31, 2010. An India-Myanmar Industrial Training Centre has been set up by HMT(I) in Myanmar with the assistance of GOI in Pakokku, a second centre is being set up in Myingyan, while the Myanmar-India Centre for English Language (MICELT), a Myanmar-India Entrepreneurship Development Centre (MIEDC).

Other projects include revamp of the Ananda Temple in Bagan, upgradation of the Yangon Children's Hospital and Sittwe General Hospital, erection of disaster proof rice silos etc. India has also assisted in the reconstruction of 1 high school and 6 primary schools in Tarlay township, the area worst affected by the severe earthquake that struck north-eastern Myanmar in March 2011.

Cooperation between India and Myanmar

Myanmar became a member of ASEAN in July 1997. As the only ASEAN country which shares a land border with India, Myanmar is a bridge between India and ASEAN. A few proposals for cooperation have been implemented and some are under discussions with Myanmar within the framework of ASEAN's IAI programme.

BIMSTEC: Myanmar became a member of BIMSTEC in December 1997. Myanmar is a signatory to the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement. Myanmar is the lead country for the energy sector. Myanmar trades mostly with Thailand and India in the BIMSTEC region. Myanmar's major exports to India are agricultural products like beans, pulses and maize and forest products such as teak and hardwoods. Its imports from India include chemical products, pharmaceuticals, electrical appliances and transport equipment. The 13th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting was held in Myanmar in January 2011.

Mekong Ganga Cooperation: Myanmar has been a member of the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) since its inception in November 2000. MGC is an initiative by six countries – India and five ASEAN countries namely, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam – for cooperation in the fields of tourism, education, culture, transport and communication. The chairmanship of MGC is assumed by member countries in alphabetical order.

Relevant questions for India-Myanmar Relations

What is the relation between India and Myanmar?

Both India and Myanmar share a heritage of religious, linguistic and ethnic ties fostered by centuries

When did Burma separate from India?

The British separated Burma Province from British India in 1937 and granted the colony a new constitution calling for a fully elected assembly, with many powers given to the Burmese, but this proved to be a divisive issue as some Burmese felt that this was a ploy to exclude them from any further Indian reforms.

Which act separated Burma from India?

The Government of Burma Act 1935 confirmed that separation would occur on April 1, 1937, ending 51 years of the country being ruled as a province of India.