



**MYANMAR'S COCO ISLANDS: A
CONCERN NOT TO BE IGNORED**

BY SHRISTI PUKHREM

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views expressed are personal.

The India-Myanmar relationship is rooted in shared history, culture, and religious values. India and Myanmar share a 1,600-kilometer (1,000-mile) land and maritime border in the Bay of Bengal, adding more significance to the bilateral relations. Furthermore, towns by the Myanmar-India border and cities such as Yangon and Naypyidaw house a large Indian diaspora of roughly 2.5 million.

With India's active outreach to neighbouring countries with its "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East" policies, India's northeastern states are connected to Southeast Asia through Myanmar. As the only ASEAN country sharing a land border with India, Myanmar is a bridge between India and ASEAN.

The strategic importance of Myanmar—with over 1,200 miles of coastline along the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, proximity to the western entrance of the Malacca Strait, and a direct linkage to the Indian Ocean—in maintaining security and stability in the wider Indo-Pacific region is clear to more than just India. In the colonial era, the Japanese imperial forces and the army of the British Empire repeatedly clashed over the control of Burma for the same strategic reasons. Fast forward to 2023 and the "Malacca Dilemma" persists. The People's Republic of China considers Myanmar a strategically important country in Southeast Asia for hegemonic ambitions in the region.

[In January 2023, Maxar Technologies](#) released satellite imagery revealing renewed levels of infrastructure and construction activities on the Great Coco Island. The Coco Islands archipelago lies less than 50 miles north of [Andaman and Nicobar Islands](#)—home to India's first tri-service command. While there has been [speculation](#) of Chinese activity in the region since the 1990s, Maxar's satellite imagery lends credence to this suspicion, and Chatham House in March 2023 [showed](#) satellite images of two new hangars, a new causeway, and an accommodation bloc. This has caused much concern, as it showed a newly expanded 7,500-foot runway and a radar station on the island.

Beijing, in its effort to establish an alternative route to the Indian Ocean, is leveraging the global isolation/ostracization of the Burmese junta in Myanmar by Western nations. Since the February 2021 Coup, Myanmar has returned to an era of isolation—ASEAN has [drafted a](#) Five-Point Consensus to navigate the return of normalcy in Myanmar, though to not much benefit. The United States and Europe have imposed sanctions on Myanmar, which increases Naypyitaw's dependence on Beijing.

However, Beijing's influence in Myanmar is not new. Even under democratic rule, Myanmar was one of the early recipients of Chinese aid under the Belt and Road Initiative. China-Myanmar cooperation was not limited to civilian infrastructure development. Military and strategic installations such the construction [of the SIGINT station had begun in the 1990s with the placing of an antenna tower, radar sites, and other electronic facilities forming a comprehensive SIGINT collection facility.](#) Beijing has slowly and steadily established more facilities, not just on the Great Coco Island, but also [SIGINT listening stations in the Andaman Sea at Manaung, Hainggyi, and Zadetkyi in Myanmar.](#) Through the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), part of the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing has invested in infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges, and railway lines, providing it access to the Indian Ocean without having to go through the Malacca Strait.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.

Cognizant of the strategic significance of these developments, the Indian government has raised the issue bilaterally with Myanmar. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs official spokesperson, Arindam Bagchi, [said](#) that “India will take all necessary steps to safeguard its interests” and that the government “keeps a constant watch on all developments having a bearing on India’s security.”

New construction activities on the island, not limited to naval ports and the possibility of a new airbase, pose challenges to India. Military leaders have long warned the possibility of Chinese infrastructure development on the island. As far back as 2005, junta leaders invited Indian defense officials to tour the island and lay to rest any concerns of Chinese involvement. Upon the visit, the then-Chief of Indian Naval Staff Admiral Arun Prakash categorically dismissed concerns of military infrastructure development on the island.

Recent developments refute this and, importantly, this coastline provides direct access to the Indian Ocean, giving China an enormous advantage over major competitors, including India. If this comes to fruition, Beijing will be able to control both the eastern part of Malacca Strait via its artificial islands in the South China Sea and the western part through CMEC and Coco Islands in Myanmar. For nations that seek to maintain a safe and secure Indo-Pacific, China’s infrastructure development on the Coco Islands adds a new dimension to this challenge.

Despite US and European sanctions, New Delhi has joined Tokyo, Moscow and Beijing in maintaining diplomatic relations with the military government in Myanmar. The Chinese activities on the Coco Islands raise questions about the benefits of that engagement for New Delhi. The military leadership in Naypyidaw has counted primarily on neighbouring states—India, China, and Japan and Russia—to keep its economy afloat. It may be time for the military leadership to rethink its support for Chinese infrastructure development on the islands, given that it cannot afford to lose more partners.