Syllabus subtopic: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India’s interests, Indian diaspora.

Prelims and Mains focus: about China’s outreach to Myanmar and its significance; its impact on India; about CPEC; BRI

News: President Xi Jinping’s visit to Myanmar starting Friday promises to turn a region that was once known as the “back door” to China into a “highway” to the Bay of Bengal by launching multiple projects under the so-called China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. The CMEC, in turn, is being presented as a critical element of Beijing’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative.

Context

China’s outreach to Myanmar is being viewed against the deterioration of Naypyidaw’s relations with the US and the West that have been critical of the country’s handling of the Rohingya problem. China, in contrast, has signalled some empathy and has also sought to mediate, if unsuccessfully, between Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Historical background

- It was modern India that saw Burma, as Myanmar was known until recently, as the backdoor to China. The East India Company and the British Raj that developed the trade routes to China’s eastern seaboard through the Indo-Pacific, were eager to develop connectivity into Yunnan through Burma to promote trade between India and western China.

- In the late 19th century, the Indian Railways surveyed the route for a railway line from the Arakan coast to Yunnan, but could never get going. China is now poised to realise that vision. Delhi, then, must find ways to take advantage of the new economic possibilities that CMEC opens up and cope with China’s new strategic salience in the Bay of Bengal.

About CMEC
• It aims at greater connectivity between China’s southwestern province of Yunnan and the eastern Indian Ocean.

• Like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that connects Beijing’s far western province of Xinjiang to Karachi and Gwadar on the Arabian Sea, the CMEC to the Bay of Bengal has begun to define the changing economic geography on India’s eastern flank.

• And between the two is the China-Nepal Economic Corridor (CNEC). Unveiled by Xi during his visit to Nepal last year, it links Tibet to Nepal and knocks at the doors of the Gangetic plain.

• Together the three corridors underline the economic rise of China and its impact on the subcontinent and its immediate periphery.

Other infrastructure projects to be discussed

• In Myanmar to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, Xi is expected to nudge his hosts to implement stalled Chinese infrastructure projects, consolidate Beijing’s status as the most important economic partner of Naypyidaw, and rejuvenate the historic special relationship between the two countries.

• Among the major infrastructure projects under consideration are the development of a special economic zone and a deep-sea port at Kyaukpyu, the construction of a railway line from the China border to Mandalay in central Myanmar.

• The railway will eventually branch out (like the economic corridor) to Kyaukpyu on the western seaboard of Myanmar and Yangon in the south where the Irrawaddy river flows into the Bay of Bengal. The railway line to Kyaukpyu will align with the twin pipeline system that has been carrying oil and natural gas to Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan, for some years.
Xi would also like to revive the hydel dam at Myitsone and the copper mining project that had to be suspended amidst the political backlash at the ground level against Chinese projects nearly a decade ago. He has managed to fend off similar opposition in Sri Lanka and will hope to do the same in Naypyidaw.

Significance of China’s partnership for Myanmar

For Naypyidaw, a stronger partnership with Beijing is certainly attractive amidst the current chill in the relationship with the West. Yet, as it prepares for elections later this year, Myanmar’s leadership is conscious of the likely criticism of Chinese projects within the country. In the last few years, Naypyidaw too has sought to negotiate hard on the terms of economic engagement with Beijing and Xi’s visit may reveal the extent of its success.

China is making the case that some of its BRI projects can help alleviate the Rohingya conflict by accelerating the development of the Arakan region. It is also offering projects to promote economic development in the conflict-prone northern frontiers of Myanmar that have long challenged the writ of the central government in the south.

Although there is much wrangling between the two countries over the terms of economic engagement — many projects have stalled in recent years because of political reservations in Myanmar.

How does China-Myanmar partnership impact India?

While there will be many twists and turns in China’s economic partnership with Myanmar, Delhi should be in no doubt about its evolution — towards greater interdependence. And as China’s economic stakes in the Bay of Bengal rise, so will Beijing’s political imperative to secure them through a larger maritime presence and naval engagement.

As the tranquil backwaters of the Bay of Bengal turn into a potential contested zone, the littorals of the bay have a stake in constructing a regional order that limits conflict and promotes cooperation across the Bay of Bengal. Delhi has every incentive to take the lead.
Instead of seeing itself in irreconcilable competition with Beijing in Myanmar, Delhi should focus on making more effective contribution to Myanmar’s development and security. India needs to focus on quickly completing its own infrastructure projects in Myanmar and develop a new strategy for commercial partnership with Naypyidaw that is in tune with India’s own capabilities and strengths.

Given the constraints on its own resources, Delhi would want to strengthen its collaboration with like-minded partners like Japan which has a growing economic presence in Myanmar.

Delhi also needs to bring fresh energy to the dormant dialogue with Beijing on the so-called BCIM corridor involving Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar. Although India has rejected China’s BRI, it has left the door open for cooperation with China on the BCIM corridor. After all, there are no sovereignty issues involved in the development of regional collaboration.

While India must vigorously negotiate the terms of that collaboration, it needs to recognise that Beijing is merely building on the logic of geographic proximity between south western China, the eastern subcontinent and Myanmar. It was a logic that expressed itself in the form of the Southern Silk Road a few centuries ago.