

BIPSS EXPLAINER

Russia's Toehold in the Indian Ocean through Dawei Port in Myanmar

Russia's memorandum with Myanmar's junta to revive the Dawei project has been publicly framed as economic cooperation; a deep-sea port, a power plant, a refinery, and a prospectus LNG corridor. However, ground reports and the unique geopolitical setting in the waters around it reveal a story more strategic in nature:

- 1. Dawei as an Alternative to the Malacca Strait:** The deep-sea port with a 150km land bridge connects Dawei directly to Bangkok and on towards Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City, avoiding the 1,200km detour around the Malay Peninsula, saving nearly 4-6 days in travel time. However, this also presents a unique workaround to the Malacca Dilemma for the Greater Mekong Sub-region and all trade across the South China sea, minimally disrupted due to its geographic proximity to the strait.



- 2. A Strategic Realignment for Myanmar:** Myanmar's growing relation with Russia shows a shift from its traditional dependence on Chinese investment. In his last visit, the Junta President Min Aung Hlaing invited both Russia & Belarus to expand trade into Myanmar, and has made diplomatic visits to 8 countries since beginning his civil presidency in April. Apart from his own diplomatic blitz to gain global legitimacy, it strongly signals that Myanmar is diversifying its global partners for multilateral co-operation and infrastructure investment, instead of its traditional reliance on China.
- 3. Russia's Interests in the Indian Ocean:** The Soviet Navy maintained a standing Indian Ocean Squadron from 1968 to 1992 with access to facilities in Somalia, South Yemen, and Ethiopia before the Soviet collapse. Russia's Maritime Doctrine states the Indian Ocean as a regional priority and since 2015 it has explicitly pushed for the development of friendly relations with India. Russia's engagement in Dawei could not only deepen economic, political and military ties with Myanmar, but would give Russia a foothold in the Andaman Sea and therefore access to the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca, expanding opportunities of regional maritime cooperation with India and other littoral states.
- 4. Russia's Increasing Military role in Myanmar:** Russia has made itself a key strategic military partner for the Junta, with \$406M in UN documented arms trade between 2021 to 2024. Russia has displayed active willingness to treat the Junta as a full, legitimate government and has enhanced military cooperation in recent years, with maritime security exercises since 2023, a five-year military and intelligence cooperation pact in February and most recently 'Operation Tropical Storm' – a 10-day special forces joint training on drone and jungle warfare in July. The playbook is in effect quite similar to Russia's involvement in Sudan, and a deep-sea port could very well give Russia a strategic advantage for standing naval assets or a port of call for submarines.
- 5. China's Interests in the Andaman Sea:** China previously conducted its own feasibility study for the Dawei Special Economic Zone and Deep-Sea Port Project before shifting its focus and resources to the Kyaukpyu, however Russian presence will present new challenges for China's interests in Myanmar. The Port stands shy of 500 kilometers due east from the Coco Island, reportedly suspected to be acting as a Chinese signals-intelligence and radar installation since the 1990s, upgraded as recently as 2023. The junta has consistently refused India's requests to inspect the site, who's has his own Military

Command in the Andaman Island just 55 km away. The involvement of Russia as an Indian ally in such proximity will present China with a unique scenario.

- 6. India's Opportunity to Balance Influence in the Region:** Facing concerns from China's growing influence, India has committed roughly \$1.6 billion to a new military airport on Great Nicobar, 40 nautical miles from the Malacca Strait, alongside runway extensions at Car Nicobar and INS Baaz, and proposals for an Andaman-based submarine fleet capable of holding Chinese shipping at risk through the strait in any conflict. Russia's expansion of influence in the Andaman Sea will act as a secondary reinforcing factor layered onto an already-moving Indian posture in the Andaman Sea, and strengthen its two-pronged approach in the Bay of Bengal with Visakhapatnam on the west.
- 7. US Threat Perception in the Indian Ocean:** Diego Garcia is the only US base in the Indian Ocean, equidistant from Bab-el-Mandeb and Malacca. It has proven operationally vital during the Iran conflict, and was recently renegotiated specifically to guard against Chinese influence in Mauritius, extending UK-US control for 99 years. Russia as a new actor in the northern Indian Ocean rim may create more "grey zone" traffic and a marginally thicker fog for US ISR, but its main perceived threat comes from the proximity of the Chinese basing network in Gwadar and Hambantota.
- 8. A New Partnership in the Bay of Bengal:** BIMSTEC adopted a new maritime security cooperation framework at the National Security Chiefs' Meeting this July, reflecting growing security concerns across the Indian Ocean. Myanmar sent its delegation to New Delhi at a time parallel to Operation Tropical Storm, showing a form of multilateral alignment in its military priorities. With a greater presence in the Indian Ocean and its strategic partnership with ASEAN since 2018, Russia could see greater participation in the Bay of Bengal maritime security including greater participation in regional cooperation structures such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.
- 9. Global Response may be Stained from the Start:** Since July, Myanmar's military has deployed a column of approximately 700 soldiers to forcibly clear land marked for the Dawei Special Economic Zone, with Deputy Commander-in-Chief Kyaw Swar Lin explicitly ordering to "crush" resistance fighters along the highway connecting Dawei to the rest of the region. The offensive has seen villages raided and residents displaced by the

thousands, with Fortify Rights documenting at least five civilians killed, including three humanitarian aid workers, in operations it says may amount to war crimes. Concerns also rise regarding the deep-sea port construction partnership with Inter RAO, the Russian state energy giant, which the EU sanctioned in July 2026.

10. The single Deciding Variable is Myanmar's Civil War: China's Kyaukpyu and Coco Islands, Russia's expanding military presence and Dawei prospects, and India's Visakhapatnam base and Andaman-Nicobar buildup creates a strategic encirclement around the Bay of Bengal, with the US anchored at Diego Garcia — but none of this matters if Myanmar's junta cannot hold Tanintharyi. Dawei also sits roughly 45 km from Myanmar's major offshore gas fields, meaning the militarized zone secures a second strategic asset alongside the deep-sea port itself. Whether Russia's forward base ever becomes operational depends less on Moscow's ambitions than on whether a military campaign already killing civilians and displacing communities by the thousands can succeed where a decade of civil war has so far prevented it.