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Educational cooperation between Myanmar and Russia: Strategic interests and contemporary collaboration

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Abstract. The article scrutinizes the evolving educational cooperation between Myanmar and Russia, illustrating its significance in strengthening bilateral relations. The author aims to study how this educational collaboration has developed from basic diplomatic ties into a strategic partnership, particularly within the context of contemporary geopolitical dynamics. The research is based on an extensive review of both historical and modern educational exchanges between the two countries, employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative analyses of official agreements and data from various institutions.

Keywords: Myanmar, Russia, security, Strategic Partnership, international scientific and technic cooperation, educational cooperation, FEFU, TSU

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Introduction

Myanmar and Russia have been establishing strong relations for over 75 years even though they are separated by vast distances. Relations between the two countries have gradually improved in areas such as military, political, economic, educational, and cultural. Since the late 1990s, Myanmar and Russia have significantly intensified their educational cooperation, positioning it as a key component within a broader strategic framework aimed at enhancing bilateral relations. This collaboration, predominantly concentrated in the domains of science and technology, encompasses university partnerships, student exchange programs, joint research initiatives, and military educational collaborations. Despite ongoing efforts to improve bilateral educational relations, there remains a limited understanding of how these educational collaborations affect their strategic partnership. This study addresses this limitation by scrutinizing the impact of educational exchanges and collaborations on the strength of bilateral strategic partnerships. The main objective of this research is to explore the role of educational cooperation in reinforcing the strategic partnership between Myanmar and Russia. Specifically, it seeks to elucidate how educational collaboration contributes to the broader bilateral relations, encompassing military-to-military interactions as well as other dimensions of cooperation. This research is significant due to the enhancing relevance of educational diplomacy in the

sphere of international relations. As Myanmar pursues to raise its educational ties with Russia, scrutinizing this collaboration can provide insight into the role of education in promoting broader military, political, economic, and diplomatic relations. This study enhances the current body of literature by examining the distinctive facets of educational cooperation between Myanmar and Russia, mainly in light of recent geopolitical shifts. It highlights the strategic significance of educational exchanges and their results for the foreign policy strategies employed by both countries.

Higher education has become a significant device of foreign policy in the Russian Federation. According to Tyushka and Czechowska (2019), in International Relations (IR), strategic partner countries often depend on educational exchanges to shape trust and mutual understanding [1. P. 32]. Russia's foreign policy, particularly the "Turn to the East" policy, stresses the strengthening of relations with ASEAN countries, including Myanmar, through educational cooperation. Russian universities such as the Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU), the Moscow Power Engineering Institute (MPEI), and the Moscow Engineering Physics Institute (MEPhI), play a key role in attracting international students and promoting scientific cooperation. Thaung Tun (2012) notes that Russia views Myanmar as a strategic partner due to its geopolitical position between China and India [2. P. 150]. Gjerde (2017) argues that Myanmar is seeking to promote its national interests through non-

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regional partners and abstain Western sanctions [3]. Educational cooperation supports Myanmar's goals for technological development and institutional development.

To address these research questions, a mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative techniques to analyze the official agreements and memoranda of understanding (MoU) between Myanmar and Russia. Most of the data for this research was collected from the Achieves as the primary source. While preparing the research, the author used the agreements signed between Nay Pyi Taw and Moscow, materials from the official websites of the two countries' organizations and universities, information published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the two countries, data from the Ministry of Science and Technology of the two countries, newspapers from the two countries' official outlets, and materials from news agencies. This article is framed within realism, a dominant theory in international relations that emphasizes the national interests, power struggle, and national security of the state. States engage in pragmatic and constructive actions that are guided by rational decision-making processes, with the primary objective of advancing their national interests and ensuring national security [4. P. 74]. Some of the activities are: *diplomacy* – it is significant in encouraging partnership between countries, facilitating negotiations, and resolving conflicts without hostility; *economic measures* – supporting economic priorities through trade pacts investments empowers countries to increase their authority and impact on the world stage; *collaborations and partnerships* – forming alliances with other countries and participating in international organizations serve to strengthen a country's security and facilitate the pursuit of its national interests and so on. In the case of Myanmar and Russia, educational ties are not just an educational and cultural exchange, but a strategic tool to achieve broader geopolitical goals. This framework effectively evaluates the role of education in international relations. It shows how states practice educational initiatives to develop their power and autonomy. Education aids as a device for domestic development and a strategic instrument for increasing global influence. This perspective highlights the balance between external pressures and self-interest and proposes that educational cooperation often stems from practical rather than idealistic motives.

The main stages of the development of educational cooperation

According to records, Myanmar took its first diplomatic steps through a Russian passenger who arrived in Burma from St. Petersburg to initiate diplomatic relations with the Russian Empire in 1873. In 1875, a diplomatic letter was signed by the Myanmar Imperial Foreign Minister, Kingwan Mun Gyi, and sent to Chancellor Alexander Gorchakov during the period of the Russian Empire, which was ruled by Emperor Alexander II, and the Kingdom of Burma under the Konbaung Dynasty [5]. Myanmar is a country of geopolitical significance in Southeast Asia and, despite its geographical remoteness, is of considerable interest to Russia. The

history of relations between Nay Pyi Taw and Moscow can be divided into two distinct parts: Burma-Soviet relations and Myanmar-Russia relations. During the period of Burma-Soviet relations, the leaders of the two countries made reciprocal visits. Bilateral educational cooperation has been beginning with the responsibilities of the two states' Ministries of Education. In 1972, 12 Myanmar students were sent to universities in Moscow and 6 Russian students also came to Yangon university to study multicultural courses and technical subjects [6]. During the Cold War, relations between Burma and the Soviet Union were normal, so the two countries were weak in science and technology, energy, economics, and other sectors. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, relations between Myanmar and Russia have rapidly improved in various fields. Since the establishment of a democratic government in Myanmar and continuing into the present administration, the two countries have consistently upheld comparable foreign policies that emphasize the principle of international cooperation and collaborative efforts in addressing regional challenges. During this time, high-ranking leaders and officials from both countries exchanged visits, held discussions, and signed memoranda of understanding to enhance their bilateral relations.

Myanmar and the Russian Federation have developed a strategic partnership through sustained high-level diplomatic engagements, bilateral agreements, and collaborative programs. Since 2000, the bilateral relations have been steadily growing, with many educational cooperation activities. Myanmar students receive scholarships to study in Russia, especially in science and technology. Russian language and culture are taught in Yangon and Mandalay Foreign Language Universities. These universities have helped to build cultural ties between the two countries. Cooperation programs between the two universities aim to open branches in Myanmar. Russian military academies train Myanmar military officers and cadets. The Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU) plays a significant role in their educational cooperation. Both countries provide joint research that addresses national interests and regional issues. The common goal is to improve the quality of education and encourage innovation. Education is seen as the foundation of their strategic partnership. Both countries are committed to improving their education systems. In Myanmar, Russian language courses are offered at the Defence Services Academy (DSA – Pyin Oo Lwin) and major universities. Educational cooperation is a top priority for both countries. The science, technology, and energy sectors are particularly central for Myanmar's development. Several MoUs have also been signed between the two countries to ratify their cooperation. Private organizations from both countries are also encouraged to join the educational effort. All of these current energies demonstrate a deep commitment to working together in education.

In 2015, Myanmar and Russia signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Geophysics and Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy [7]. This is a significant step forward in scientific cooperation. It helps in the safe development of geophysics and nuclear technologies. In 2016, they signed

a military cooperation agreement between the two militaries [8]. This strengthens the relationship between the two militaries and helps them work better together. They agreed to open a branch of FEFU in Myanmar in 2022 [9]. This strengthens scientific and educational ties. Students from Myanmar will have access to more high-quality education. In 2023, they opened the Myanmar-Russia Joint Information Center on Nuclear Technology. This center will share knowledge on nuclear technology and promote peaceful uses. During Prime Minister Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's visit to Russia in 2025, 10 new MoUs were signed. They include education, health, and nuclear energy. They profound the strategic relationship between the two countries. These agreements demonstrate a common goal to jointly address common international and regional issues. Myanmar and Russia are systematically working to expand cooperation in many areas. Bilateral educational cooperation is a key component of their strategic partnership. The same is true for science, technology, and military training. Their joint efforts reflect growing trust and mutual support. Both countries are building a long-term strategic partnership based on common goals. Through these agreements and initiatives, the relationship is moving from normal relations to strategic partnership in meaningful ways.

Educational cooperation between Myanmar and Russia has made progress in recent years. The two countries have also signed a number of intergovernmental agreements to strengthen educational ties. In 2022, a major memorandum of understanding was signed between Naypyitaw and Moscow to promote scientific and technological cooperation [10]. The number of Myanmar students studying in Russia has increased significantly. In addition, engineering and technical cooperation programs are a priority. Senior diplomats and officials from both countries meet regularly to discuss educational activities. Recent bilateral conferences have focused on expanding educational opportunities in various fields. The signing of agreements on joint research projects is a key element. Funding for educational exchanges has been increased. Russia is working to create more scholarships for students from Myanmar. The Russian government has expressed interest in supporting educational reforms in Myanmar. Educational forums have been organized to share best practices. Recent developments show a shift towards more strategic cooperation in education. New agreements accentuate the role of technology in education. Both countries are discovering opportunities for online education initiatives. Current negotiations have publicized a commitment to long-term cooperation in the field of education. Overall, recent developments demonstrate a positive approach to strengthening educational ties.

Interests of Myanmar and Russia in educational cooperation

Myanmar is focused on advancing national interests through educational cooperation with Russia. The countries aspire to endorse modern technological advancement in various sectors. The development of a highly skilled workforce is a paramount priority for the

economic advancement of Myanmar. Educational interactions are seen as a way to progress the workforce. Myanmar aims to profit from Russia's scientific and technological expertise. The government intends to send students abroad for higher education. Strengthening educational ties with Russia is part of Myanmar's broader development strategy. The focus on vocational training is in line with its national economic goals. Myanmar identifies the essential of international cooperation in education. Cooperation with Russia is anticipated to facilitate knowledge transfer. The government is also interested in research cooperation with Russian universities. Improving educational infrastructure is a crucial area. Myanmar's interests include increasing cultural exchanges through education. It views educational cooperation as a way to strengthen diplomatic relations. Building a knowledgeable workforce is crucial to the country's progress. It views cooperation with Russia as mutually beneficial. Myanmar aims to promote cooperation in education for sustainable development.

Russia seeks to inflate its influence in Southeast Asia, including Myanmar, through educational cooperation. Strengthening bilateral relations with Myanmar is a strategic goal for Russia. It sights educational cooperation as a way to boost its soft power. Russia is interested in long-term cooperation with Myanmar's educational organizations.

**Number of Myanmar officer students
in Russian universities (2001–2024) [11]**

| Year | D.Sc. | Ph.D. | M.Sc. | Total |
|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 2024 | 21 | 105 | 286 | 412 |
| 2023 | 3 | 15 | 65 | 83 |
| 2022 | 3 | 26 | 109 | 138 |
| 2021 | 3 | 15 | 127 | 145 |
| 2020 | 2 | 21 | 147 | 170 |
| 2019 | 1 | 4 | 109 | 114 |
| 2018 | 7 | 26 | 65 | 98 |
| 2017 | 4 | 30 | 137 | 171 |
| 2016 | 2 | 71 | 170 | 243 |
| 2015 | - | 84 | 109 | 193 |
| 2014 | 2 | 44 | 146 | 192 |
| 2013 | - | 31 | 169 | 200 |
| 2012 | 3 | 49 | 367 | 419 |
| 2011 | 1 | 52 | 278 | 331 |
| 2010 | 4 | 59 | 376 | 439 |
| 2009 | - | 39 | 563 | 602 |
| 2008 | 1 | 47 | 920 | 968 |
| 2007 | - | 42 | 945 | 987 |
| 2006 | - | 38 | 522 | 560 |
| 2005 | - | 20 | 469 | 489 |
| 2004 | - | 33 | 400 | 433 |
| 2003 | - | - | 428 | 428 |
| 2002 | - | - | 237 | 237 |
| 2001 | - | - | 273 | 273 |
| Total | 57 | 851 | 7,417 | 8,325 |

Russia's enlargement of educational cooperation is part of its "Turn to the East" foreign policy. The cooperation is anticipated to aid Russia's geopolitical interests in the region. Russia is trying to endorse its culture and language through educational ties. Increasing the number of Myanmar students in Russian universities is a precedent. In addition, both countries see their cooperation as a way to counter Western influence in the region. Russia's

involvement in Myanmar's educational sector is in line with its national interests. Strengthening military-educational relations is also a strategic goal for Russia. Russia pursues to support Myanmar's development while strengthening its own position. Joint research projects aim to showcase Russia's capabilities. Educational cooperation is seen as a platform for broader economic relations. Russia has decided to provide scholarships and study opportunities. The focus on education is consistent with Russia's vision of developing a global partnership. Strengthening bilateral relations through education is seen as a long-term investment. Overall, Russia's interests reflect its commitment to building a strategic partnership with Myanmar.

The Ministry of Defence of Myanmar has been sending military officers to study at various Russian universities since 2001. The Ph.D. program started in 2004, and the D.Sc. program began in 2008. As of 2024, there are a total of 412 Myanmar officer students enrolled, including 21 in the D.Sc. program and 105 in the Ph.D. program. The total number of students has grown from 273 in 2001 to a peak of 439 in 2010. While the D.Sc. program has seen only 57 students over the years, the M.Sc. program has the highest enrollment, with 7,417 students. Overall, from 2001 to 2024, a total of 8,325 Myanmar officer students have studied in Russia. However, only 6,732 of those students returned with a successful degree. During this period, 771 students returned without a degree, including 5 D.Sc., 137 Ph.D. and 629 M.Sc. Reasons for returning without a degree included climate, health problems, language barriers, and challenges in accessing academic subjects. All students were educated with the budget of the Myanmar Ministry of Defence. In recent years, ROSATOM Atomic Energy Cooperation has provided a number of scholarships to civilian ministries. This year, it is reported that it has also provided scholarships to the Ministry of Defence.

Number of students from the Myanmar Ministry of Civil Affairs studying in Rosatom partnership universities in Russia on scholarships (2023–2024) [12]

| Year | MPEI | MEPhI | MISIS | BMSTU | TPU | SPbPU | NNSTU | MAU | Total |
|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-------|-------|-----|-------|
| 2024 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 12 | 10 | 1 | 34 |
| 2023 | 14 | 4 | - | - | 3 | 2 | - | - | 23 |
| Total | 15 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 14 | 10 | 1 | 57 |

On August 22, 2023, a seminar was held in Yangon for former Myanmar students from Russian universities, provided by Rosatom State Corporation and the Ministry of Science and Technology of Myanmar. The aim of this seminar was to increase bilateral relations and endorse regional development. In line with this initiative, Rosatom provided several scholarships to students from technical universities under the Ministry of Science and Technology. For the academic year 2023–2024, a total of 34 students are enrolled in Rosatom partnership universities in Russia on scholarships. This includes students from various institutions, such as MPEI, MEPhI, and SPbPU. In 2023, 23 students received scholarships, while an additional

34 students are expected to enroll in 2024. Overall, there are 57 students from the Myanmar Ministry of Civil Affairs studying at these universities on scholarships. This effort reflects the commitment to strengthen educational ties and foster collaboration between Myanmar and Russia.

University collaborations and joint projects

The Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU) plays an important role in developing educational cooperation between the two countries. FEFU dynamically contributes in joint activities with delegations from Myanmar and in signing agreements with local educational institutions, such as Yangon University. These partnerships are intended at endorsing educational plans and research that will profit both countries. The establishment of the Center for Russian Language and Culture at Yangon University of Foreign Studies is a significant milestone in encouraging cultural exchange and language ability. In 2024, Tomsk State University (TSU) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Yangon University, further expanding cooperation in education and research [13]. This partnership is anticipated to simplify student exchanges and joint research projects, and expand the educational landscape in Myanmar. The collaboration between these universities reflects a systematic method to structure long-term educational relations. Such collaborations not only supplement the educational experience of students but also contribute to the development of Myanmar's science and technology. By enhancing university cooperation, both countries participate in future leaders who can overcome complex global and regional challenges. The emphasis on educational cooperation underscores the importance of knowledge sharing and cultural exchanges in strengthening the strategic relationship between the two countries.

Joint projects in science and technology in the framework of bilateral educational cooperation have yielded practical and positive results. Graduates of the Russian MPEI University have played a substantial role in the development of solar and wind energy systems in Myanmar. These projects are in line with global efforts to help renewable energy and sustainability, and reproduce a commitment to environmental fortification [14]. The expertise gained from Russian education has enabled Myanmar to successfully operate its abundant energy resources. In addition, military officers trained at the St. Petersburg Marine Technical University have contributed in the building of frigates for the Myanmar Navy [15]. This initiative has not only boosted the capabilities of the Myanmar Navy, but also endorsed technology transfer and skills advance within the country. The creation of these frigates proves the practical application of knowledge gained through academic cooperation. These joint projects afford crucial education, training, and skills for the development of the country. It underlines the systematic integration of technology and defence. By focusing on joint efforts in science and technology, Myanmar and Russia are laying the foundation for future innovations that can address shared challenges. The ongoing commitment to these projects reflects a strategic partnership aimed at mutual growth and progress in various sectors.

Conclusion

Research illustrates that educational cooperation between Myanmar and Russia has become a strategic benefit and has significantly supplied to the expansion of the strategic partnership. Russia has created a foothold in South-east Asia through academic diplomacy, science and technology, and military education, and Myanmar has acquired crucial technological and defense expertise to solve problems in its region, endorse national development, and enhance sovereignty. Educational cooperation serves as a bridge for deeper cooperation in areas such as energy, de-

fense, and science and technology, and reflects the pragmatic vision of the two countries to engage in joint activities in the national interest. The increase in the number of agreements, student exchanges, conference exchanges, joint project activities, and joint research underscores the transformation of bilateral relations from normal relations to strategic partnerships. Therefore, the answer to the research question is clear: educational cooperation between Myanmar and Russia contributes to the development of a strategic partnership by combining mutual interests in defense modernization, scientific and technological progress, geopolitical influence, foreign policy implementation, and resilience to Western pressure.

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