

India-Myanmar relations

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“Although the shift in India’s policy towards Myanmar is often justified in the name of “non-intervention” in the internal affairs of other nations, it was not principal but realpolitik that guided New Delhi’s changing attitudes towards Yangon since the mid 1990’s”.

--Professor C. Rajan Mohan¹

Introduction

For India Myanmar is strategically important because of its geostrategic location linking the regions of East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. In India, Myanmar is viewed as a “land bridge” to Southeast Asia and as a vital link in its “Look East policy”.² Myanmar, with an area of 6,76,552 sq. km. (2,61,218 sq. miles) shares common borders with five countries: China (2,185 km); India (1,463 km); Bangladesh (193 km); Thailand (1,800 km); and Laos (235 km).³ Myanmar borders four strategically sensitive north-eastern states of India, namely, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh. The insurgent groups active in India’s north-eastern region had established sanctuaries in Myanmar’s bordering states – Kachin, Sagaing, and Chin – for cross-border activities. Myanmar also has a 1,930 km long coastline⁴ in the Bay of Bengal and is only 30 km away from the strategic Andaman Islands of India. Thus, as observed by Indian analyst, Col. R. Haricharan (retd), Myanmar “provides convenient external land and sea communication options to India’s land locked north-eastern states”.⁵

An analysis of India-Myanmar foreign relations shows that over the period they have been equally marked by mistrust as well as amity. Also, the other dilemma of the relationship is that on one hand India supports the democratic forces and their struggle in Myanmar, however, on the other hand, in view of its interests in the region, Indian governments have been engaged with the military governments in Myanmar. As observed by an Indian analyst, “India faces a moral dilemma whether to support the pro-democracy forces in Myanmar or adhere to the principals of realpolitik and engage the military regime in its national interest. India’s foreign policy makers prefer to follow the middle path or “Madhyam Marga” as it’s called and choose to engage the military regime without abandoning Indian support to the pro-democracy forces in Myanmar”.⁶ Since its independence in 1948, the internal political environment of Myanmar (initially Burma) has been marred by the tussle between democratic forces and military rulers. Between 1948-62, the military took power in 1949 and 1958 but the democratic forces continued their struggle. Then from 1962 to 1988, a military government was established under General Ne Win. During this period, there was political suppression in Myanmar but despite this repression there were frequent demonstrations by the democratic forces against General Ne Win’s military rule. In 1988, another military government called State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) came to power in Myanmar, unleashing massive suppressive measures to restore law and order. It is during this period that Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of General Aung San,⁷ launched the pro-democracy struggle and became the opposition leader in Myanmar. India supported the democratic struggle and provided sanctuaries and financial assistance to political activists from Myanmar. However, in view of India’s long-term strategic interests, India has also cautiously established relations with the military governments in Myanmar. According to Indian Professor, Dilip Gogoi, “It is essential to go for a concrete rational policy choice which could focus beyond the present military regime and remove present anxieties and ambiguity. As Myanmar is the gateway to Southeast Asia and a vital component for the success of India’s Look East policy, hence, India cannot ignore and requires positive engagement with Myanmar.”⁸

In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyse the changing nature of India’s relations with Myanmar – from cold ties to a policy of cautious proactive engagement in recent years.

Relations: Three Phases

India-Myanmar relations can be divided into three phases: 1948-1962; 1962-1992; and 1992-till to date. During the first phase, 1948-1962, India and Myanmar had friendly relations. The first Prime Minister of

Myanmar, U Nu, had close friendly relations with Indian prime minister Pandit Nehru, and used to consult Nehru on many occasions.⁹ During this period, Myanmar was active in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) along with India. The presence of a large number of Indians in Myanmar, working in various fields, was also a strong reason in bringing India and Myanmar closer. India supported Prime Minister U Nu's internal policies, including his land reform efforts, though his policies deprived many Indians of their ownership rights in the Irrawaddy Delta in Myanmar and also deprived many Indians of their civil jobs.¹⁰ India also developed economic and military relations with the civil government in Myanmar as part of its policy of supporting the democratic forces. However, the democratic process in Myanmar was affected by conflicts, political rivalry, constitutional disputes and ethnic and communal conflicts. India provided support to the Myanmar government in dealing with insurgencies and sub-national militancy. During this period, the military came to power in Myanmar in 1949 and 1958, which further complicated and worsened the internal situation. In 1962, under a military coup, the Army Chief, General Ne Win, displaced the civilian prime minister, abolished the 1947 Constitution and established a military government.

The second phase of India-Myanmar relations from 1962 to 1988 may be described as a period of "cold relations." General Ne Win's policy of political suppression and restriction of Indians and deportation of around 100000 Indians¹¹ was not supported by India and widened the gulf between India and Myanmar. As observed by Tony Allison in his article in *Asia Times Online*, "Domestic policies including the expulsion of ethnic Indians and later a closer Sino-Burmese axis soured the relationship with Delhi and for a quarter of a century until 1988 there was virtually no contact. The ruthlessness of the army in the bloody repression of August 8, 1988, led to Delhi distancing itself further and the relationship was severely strained."¹² Since India distanced itself from Myanmar, it moved closer to China. According to an Indian analyst, P. M. S. Malik, "An Indian policy, which had established that India's interest in Burma was largely benign in nature, had assured itself a marginalised position in Burma's policy decisions."¹³ Also, India's defeat in the 1962 Sino-Indian border conflict also resulted in Myanmar military government's tilt towards China. As observed by Mr. Malik Burmese leaders were doubtful whether India would be able to counter Chinese influence.¹⁴

During this period, the internal situation in Myanmar also deteriorated and in September 1988, General Ne Win's government was replaced by another military government: "State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)," which imposed martial law in Myanmar. During this period, Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of National League for Democracy (NLD) started the democratic movement. India supported the anti-SLORC movement and provided sanctuaries to activists from Myanmar. Ms Kyi was put under house arrest in 1990 and, barring the brief periods in 1995 and 2000, she continues to be under house arrest till to date. India has been advocating the release of Ms Kyi. Also, in 1991, India released Soe Myint, one of the Burmese nationals accused of hijacking a Thai jet on its way to Kolkata in 1990.¹⁵ Then in July 1992, Myanmar's opposition National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) was allowed to open its office on Indian soil. Understandably, these steps further deteriorated relations. "Yangon saw these steps as blatant interference in Myanmar's internal affairs".¹⁶ A change in Indian approach towards Myanmar was witnessed in 1993 and, despite the presence of a military government, New Delhi pursued a policy of engagement with Myanmar. This brings us to the third phase of India-Myanmar relations, which is discussed later in the paper. Before expounding on the third phase, it is important to discuss briefly the factors resulting in the change in Indian approach towards Myanmar.

Factors Influencing Change in Indian Policy

Three factors are behind the change in Indian approach towards Myanmar: increased Chinese influence in Myanmar; stability of the Indian north-eastern region; and the "Look East" policy of India.

Chinese Influence:

Myanmar's close economic and military relations with China are a cause of concern to India. Through Myanmar, China gets easy access to the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea which is a cause of concern from India. China provides almost 80 per cent of defence equipment to Myanmar.¹⁷ China has also established its naval listening and weather posts on Myanmar's Coco Island, which also perturbs India.¹⁸ As regards economic cooperation, China is cooperating with Myanmar in various fields, including trade, commerce, and electricity supply. China also provides aid for various developmental projects. As

regards infrastructure development, China is involved in building roads, for example, the road from Kunming in southern China region to Mandalay in central Myanmar.¹⁹ China and Myanmar also plan to set up a 30,000 square mile offshore economic zone for exploitation of natural resources. In India, this is being interpreted as a threat to India's maritime and economic interests in the Indian Ocean.²⁰ As observed by Indian analyst, Dr. Subhash Kapila, "India's indifference to Myanmar in the decades indicated, created a vacuum enabling China to step in and exploit the situation for strategic reasons".²¹ Also, according to Lawrence Freedman, India fears "encirclement by China and pro-Chinese regimes in Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as Myanmar".²²

India's North-eastern Region

The various ethnic based militant insurgencies in India's north-eastern states pose internal security challenges to India and presence of activists of insurgent groups active in the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland, sharing a 1,643 km long border with Myanmar, is a cause of concern to India. Therefore, India needs Myanmar's cooperation in dealing with the separatists active in the northeast. Also, a stable northeast region, with developed communication lines and infrastructure, is essential for India's "Look East" policy (discussed below) to be successful. As observed by Indian analyst, Dilip Gogoi, "with the increasing interdependence and regional cooperation, now Indian policymakers realise the geo-economic potential of the Northeast region as a gateway to East and the southeast Asia".²³ And this requires cooperation and support by Myanmar. For example, there are proposals for building road networks, such as the Kaladam Multi-Modal Transit Transport Facility – connecting Indian eastern ports and Sittwe Port in Myanmar. Then there are proposals for developing riverine transport and railway lines. Thus development of relations with Myanmar is important for India.

Look East Policy

In the 1990s, Indian Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao, as part of the economic liberalisation policy, initiated the Look East Policy for developing strategic and economic relations with East and Southeast Asian countries and ASEAN members. With the change of government in India, however, the focus on developing relations with East and Southeast Asian countries has continued. Myanmar provides a strategic link to the East and Southeast Asian countries and therefore development of relations with Myanmar became an important requirement for India.

Proactive Engagement

The third phase of India-Myanmar relations, 1992-till to date, shows a shift in Indian policy towards Myanmar because of the factors discussed above. Though, India supports the democratic struggle in Myanmar, yet it has adopted a policy of proactive engagement with Myanmar. The breakthrough in relations began in 1993 with the visit by then Indian Foreign Secretary, J. N. Dixit to Yangon. India and Myanmar signed agreements to enhance border trade and for controlling drug trafficking. In 1994, India and Myanmar signed a Memorandum of Understanding to Maintain Border Tranquillity.²⁴ In 1995, relations strained when the Indian government conferred the Jawaharlal Nehru Award on Aung San Suu Kyi. As a protest, Myanmar's military government suspended counter-insurgency cooperation²⁵. However, relations improved in 1998 and since then there has been exchange of important visits by officials from the two countries, for example, Indian Foreign Secretary, K. Ragnath (February 1998); Myanmar's Vice Chairman of SPDC, Maung Aye (November 2000); Indian Vice President, Shri Bhairon Singh Shekhawat (November 2003); Myanmar's Head of State, General Than Shwe (October 2004); and Indian President, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam Azad (March 2006).

Trade between India and Myanmar has been growing – India is Myanmar's fourth largest trading partner. In 2006-2007, trade between the two neighbouring states was estimated at \$650 million and Indian investment in Myanmar in 2006 was \$35.08 million.²⁶

As part of infrastructure development, India is involved in building roads connecting the two countries by land. Prominent among these road links is the 160 km India-Myanmar Friendship road inaugurated in 2001. Known as the Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo Road, the highway links, Moreh in Manipur, India with Tamu in Myanmar. The project was conceived in 1993 and India spent 90 crore rupees on the project²⁷. This road is to be extended to Mae Sot at the Thai border. India has also agreed to assist in the up gradation

of cross-border roads, such as Rhi-Tidim and Rhi-Falam road sections in Myanmar²⁸. India is also involved in the up gradation of the Yangon-Mandalay Trunk line and optical fibre link between Moreh and Mandalay in Myanmar.²⁹ Another important project is the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project connecting the Indian state of Mizoram with the Bay of Bengal, which involves the up gradation of Sittwe Port in Myanmar where the Kaladan River falls in the Bay of Bengal.³⁰ In January 2008, the Indian government has committed US\$ 120 million for rebuilding the Sittwe Port and also to construct road and water links. The final agreement is expected to be signed in April 2008 in New Delhi during the visit of a high level delegation from Myanmar.³¹ The development of the port would also help facilitate in the gas pipeline project for transferring natural gas from Myanmar's Arrakan state to India's north-eastern state of Assam. India is also investing in Myanmar for the development of its rail infrastructure. This is part of the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) project linking New Delhi with Hanoi, Vietnam. India has approved a credit of US\$ 56 million for this purpose.³² India is also involved in the up gradation of the Yangon-Mandalay rail sector in Myanmar. Another project involves the rail track from Jiribam in Manipur (India) to Moreh (Myanmar). This project is to be completed by 2010.³³

Despite criticism from the West and European countries, India has cautiously developed defence relations with Myanmar. It is one of the two main suppliers of military hardware to Myanmar. The other is China. India also provides training facilities at its defence academy. The two armies have also developed an understanding to strengthen mechanism to counter cross-border militancy. Indian Navy and the Navy of Myanmar have also developed close cooperation. In August 2007, India delivered two BN-2 Defender maritime surveillance aircrafts to Myanmar.³⁴ In September 2003 and December 2005 the two navies held joint manoeuvres.³⁵ Since 2003, Myanmar also participates in MILAN – a multilateral meeting organised by Indian Navy for developing confidence-building between the Indian Ocean navies.

Conclusion

Despite criticism and sanctions by the West against Myanmar's military government, India's policy of proactive engagement with Myanmar is aimed at furthering Indian influence in Myanmar and the region. India is not only in the process of developing bilateral relations but is also cooperating with Myanmar in regional forums particularly ASEAN and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The other important Indian aim is to counter the increasing Chinese influence in its neighbourhood. This approach has been aptly summarised by Indian analyst C. Raja Mohan, "India's disturbing silence during the current turmoil in Myanmar can only be understood in the context of New Delhi's long and turbulent relationship with the military rulers of Yangon. Having paid the price for being a lone supporter of democratic aspirations in Myanmar for decades, India is hesitant to depart from its current policy of constructive engagement".³⁶

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