

Reflections on Indo-Myanmar Relations

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India and Myanmar share a 1600-km long land border with four of India's Northeastern states. The boundary straddles several ethnic tribes inhabiting the area. At one time, this had prompted the British to make Myanmar-then Burma-a part of India. Many of these tribes have fought or continue to fight with governments on either side of the border.

Myanmar has land border with four other countries in South and Southeast Asia, including China. One-third of its total perimeter of 1,930 km forms an uninterrupted coastline along the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. It straddles several busy shipping lanes. During the Second World War, Japanese forces invaded Burma. They were able to reach up to Imphal and Kohima on land, and were able to make their presence felt in the Bay of Bengal, before they were forced to withdraw by Indian forces. India's relations with Myanmar are crucial for domestic security reasons and other aspects of foreign policy.

The Past

I will not go too far into the past of Indo Myanmar security relations. It is worth noting that in the 17th century, several Meitei rulers from Manipur would raid Burmese areas right up to the Irrawady River. And when the Mandalay Empire under King Bodawpaya became strong, it annexed Manipur in 1814 and part of Assam in 1817. It was the second largest empire in the Burmese history, but also one with a long, ill-defined border with British India. The breadth of this empire,

however, was short lived. Burma lost Arakan, Manipur and Assam to the British in the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1824–26.

Burma was colonised by Britain following three Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824–1885). In 1886, British made it a province of India. This arrangement lasted until 1937 when they decided to administer it separately. Burma achieved its independence from the British rule on 4 January 1948.

India's relations with Burma, which started on a cordial note in 1948, went into a headlong dive when the latter came under the revolutionary council headed by General Ne Win in early 1960s. His military rule and relentless persecution of "resident aliens" (immigrant groups not recognised as citizens of the *Union of Burma*) led to an exodus/expulsion of some 300,000 Burmese Indians. The uneasy Indo Myanmar relations were exploited by secessionist Naga, Manipuri and Mizo groups to establish safe, ethnic sanctuaries and training camps in Myanmar, across the mountainous and heavily forested porous border. Large gangs of Naga insurgents, in hundreds, would go to Yunnan (China) for training and supply of weapons and equipment. In 1967, a large gang under Mowu Angami, returning from China was intercepted when it entered India. At that time, there were no contacts between the Indian and Myanmar armies except at the level of border posts. I was posted in Nagaland in 1974, when the last large gang of Naga insurgents, attempting to go to China through North Myanmar, was intercepted and stopped from crossing into Myanmar.

A few important points need to be noted when we consider cross border movement of insurgents along the Indo-Myanmar border. Primarily, the writ of the Myanmar Government in North and West Myanmar, inhabited and dominated by insurgent tribes, is weak. Myanmar armed forces (the Tatmadaw) do not have the capacity to take pro-active military action (here and elsewhere) to put down insurgencies in the manner the Indian armed forces can do. Secondly, despite large scale deployment of regular and para military troops inside Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, and better surveillance along Indo-Myanmar border, it is extremely difficult to eliminate cross border movement of small groups of secessionist elements. Thirdly, India and Myanmar have traditionally allowed tribals from both sides to travel freely up to 16 km and purchase necessities from local *haats* as per an old treaty. Lastly, the pernicious *Inner Line* permit regime has now become an obstacle in proper integration of Border States in our Northeast.

Due to Myanmar's long years of stringent military rule and isolation, and our (India's) own ideologically oriented foreign policies, Yangon drew closer to Beijing.

China-Myanmar Historical Relations

China and Myanmar have had several border disputes dating long before the British annexation of Burma. The last border dispute culminated in 1956, when People's Liberation Army invaded northern Myanmar. That was repulsed. A border agreement-along the extension of McMahon Line-was reached in 1960, which enabled substantial improvement in relations between the two countries. In the absence of any other regional power, Chinese influence in Myanmar increased substantially. Many Sino-Burmese were influenced by the Cultural

Revolution in China and began to wear Mao badges. In June 1967, due to increasing number of ethnic Chinese students supporting Mao by carrying the quotations from Chairman Mao books, large scale anti-Chinese riots broke out in Myanmar. Shops and homes were ransacked and burned. The Chinese government berated the Myanmar government and started a war of words but no other actions were taken. The anti-Chinese riots continued till early 1970s.

After some time, China withdrew its support to the Communist Party of Burma and began to supply weapons and equipment to the military junta in exchange for greater access to Myanmar markets. The influx of Chinese arms also turned the tide against Myanmar's ethnic insurgencies, many of which had relied indirectly on Chinese complicity. As a result, the military junta of Myanmar became even more reliant on China for their high level of power.

I must also state that during this period, partly due to post-1962 China phobia in India, and because large scale military invasions across international borders were still considered possible, India's intelligence and security agencies used to take Chinese military threat through Northern Myanmar quite seriously.

India's Shift to *Realpolitik*

In the next two decades, due to Myanmar's long years of stringent military rule and isolation, and our own ideologically oriented foreign policies, Yangon drew closer to Beijing for political and economic support and for military weapons, equipment and training. China developed road communications and trade links from Yunnan (China) into North Myanmar. That caused heavy influx of Chinese immigrants (approximately 1.5 million) and their socio-economic influence reached right up to Irrawady River. India's secessionist groups from the Northeast continued to operate from their safe sanctuaries in Northwest Myanmar. Gun running and

drug traffic from the Golden Triangle into Northeast India by land and sea routes increased substantially. During this period, India's security concerns took a back seat and ideology took the front seat. As the only economic and defense hardware partner, Beijing got a huge strategic and economic advantage over India.

The credit for changing the course of ethics based policy to *realpolitik* in Indo-Myanmar relations goes to the governments of PV Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee. They realised that without diplomatic relations and cooperation with Myanmar, it would be impossible to control insurgencies and bring about stability in our Northeastern states, or to pursue India's 'Look East' policy. Besides, the fast growing balance of power and influence of China in India's immediate neighborhood and Southeast Asia, our long term political and economic interests required a constructive policy in the East. By now, encouraged by China, Pakistan too had established military to military contacts with Myanmar and began to supply some arms and ammunition. These imperatives made it necessary to engage with the Myanmar military regime. India's national security concerns thus guided New Delhi's *realpolitik* and change of attitude towards Yangon.

In March 1993, Foreign Secretary JN Dixit visited Yangon and signed a bilateral agreement to control drug trafficking and border trade. A Memorandum of Understanding to maintain border tranquility was signed next year (1994). Border meetings between army personnel were encouraged and military visits across the border were re-started at a low key.

In 1999, several proposals on Indo Myanmar cooperation were under consideration but there was limited progress due to lack of political contacts. Prime Minister Vajpayee and National Security Advisor (NSA) Brajesh Mishra then decided to utilise military diplomacy to supplement India's foreign policy.

In November 1999, Ambassador Shyam Saran (later Foreign Secretary) proposed to the Myanmar military government that I, then Chief of Army Staff and Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee, have a 'quiet' meeting with General Maung Aye, then Vice Chairman, Government of Myanmar, Deputy C-in-C, Armed Forces, and C-in-C, Myanmar Army. This would lead to my inviting Maung Aye and some Myanmar ministers (mostly military officers) for a meeting with ministers from India.

Initially, the Ministry of External Affairs suggested that this meeting be held at Tamu-Moreh on the Myanmar-India border. I rejected such a border meeting at the level of the Chiefs. After discussions with NSA, it was decided that I would go with a small military delegation to Mandalay and after our meetings, bring the Myanmar's delegation with me to Shillong.



On January 5, 2000, after canceling all engagements for the next four days, I left for Imphal in an Air Force Avro aircraft along with a small tri service delegation. Early next morning, after flying across the Chindwin River and thick forested Chin Hills, we landed in Mandalay, the second largest city in Myanmar on the eastern bank of the Irrawady River. We were received on the red carpeted tarmac by Maung Aye and almost the entire Myanmar cabinet (mostly generals). Ambassador Shyam Saran and the Military Attache Colonel Jasbir Singh were at hand. From the airport, Maung Aye escorted me personally to an impressive guard of honour and then to the room allotted to me in the Nanmyo Guest House.

Over the next 48 hours, besides a formal meeting, dinner, visit to nearby military institutes (in Pyin Oo Lwin) and local sightseeing, I had several one-on-one discussions with Maung Aye. We discussed the need to enlarge Indo-Myanmar cooperation in the military field to include greater border contacts, passing of real time information and coordinated operations against the insurgents on both sides of the border. I also apprised him of the training programs and non lethal equipment that we could offer. The need to expedite planning and implementation of the civil projects already accepted in principle by our two countries and widening diplomatic exchanges were also discussed. Maung Aye and his colleagues never spoke about China but quite apparently were keen on enlarging civil and military ties with India.

On January 8, our respective delegations in separate aircrafts flew to Shillong via Guwahati. The Air Force gave a guard of honour to the visiting Vice Chairman of Myanmar. Maung Aye and his delegation met Murasoli Maran, Union Minister of Commerce and Industry and Kumaramanglam, Union Minister for Power, and civil officials from several ministries who had flown in from New Delhi. After the formal introductory meeting, Maung Aye and I withdrew to a bungalow where we stayed together while the ministers and officials from both countries discussed India's assistance for development of roads, trade links and hydro power projects in Myanmar.

When Maung Aye left Shillong, I gave him a map marked with locations of hostile Naga gangs in North Myanmar and asked him to get them raided by Myanmar Army. A fortnight later, these camps were raided and destroyed. When the insurgents attempted to run across the boundary into India, they were ambushed by our troops and suffered more casualties.

In April 2000, I was invited by the Government of Myanmar; this time more formally. The hosts gave us full opportunity to travel and meet officials and people in different parts of Myanmar. I met Chairman, General Than Shwe and other leaders. Our cooperation by this time had extended well beyond insurgents' cross border activities. It included mutually beneficial infrastructure projects, offer of seats in Indian technical and military institutions, participation in Indian Navy's Exercise Milan in the Bay of Bengal, border trade and several other diplomatic issues.

On this occasion, I also raised the issue of the much rumoured Chinese surveillance base in Coco Island (just North of A & N group of islands in the Bay of Bengal) to monitor Indian Naval as well as ISRO and DRDO missile and space launch activities. This was firmly denied by Maung Aye. He offered me a visit to the Coco Island, if I could.

On my return, I apprised Prime Minister Vajpayee that notwithstanding national or international unpopularity, Myanmar military regime is likely to remain in the saddle for many years. China had gained marked socio-economic influence, particularly in North and Northeast Myanmar. Unless we make efforts, this influence will extend to the West of Irrawady River and in the South. The Myanmar Government was keen to improve relations with India in the fields of economic development and technology, which ought to be reciprocated.

Myanmar will take time to evolve as a democratic, federal state with equal opportunities for all.

The Nuclear Threat

In 2007, Russia and Myanmar signed a controversial Nuclear Research Centre deal. According to some reports, this Centre was to comprise 'a 10MW light-water reactor working on 20 per cent enriched uranium-235, an activation analysis laboratory, a medical isotope production laboratory, silicon doping system, nuclear waste treatment and burial facilities'. This report was followed up by some more reports in 2009 that Myanmar, with assistance from North Korea, was working to develop nuclear weapons by 2014. This became a major cause of concern for the world, particularly in India. Later, these reports which had originated from two high-ranking defectors settled in Australia were found to be baseless. Incidentally, Myanmar is a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) since 1957, and a signatory of the nuclear non-proliferation pact since 1992. The military junta had informed the IAEA in September 2000 of its intention to construct the Research Centre.

The Present

There have been many important political developments in Myanmar in the last two years. President Thein Sein's nominally civilian government has replaced military rule and carried out a number of reforms like the release of political prisoners and relaxation of media restrictions. After recent by-elections, pro democracy leader Suu Kyi and her party leaders have joined the Parliament, although that continues to be dominated by the military. This shift, I believe, is an assertion of India's policy of engaging the military government of Myanmar. Now, when leaders from US, UK, France and Australia are making a beeline to Naypyidaw and inclined to lift sanctions imposed by them earlier, India has an advantage and a huge opportunity to move into high gear dynamics of its regional and 'Look East' policy.

The new government has been able to negotiate ceasefire agreements with most insurgent groups. The fact that talks with various groups include a political dialogue and not just operational issues, is certainly a big step forward. It addresses the issue of an inclusive political architecture. As yet, it is difficult to visualise that the insurgent groups who for ages have been indulging in drug cultivation and traffic, will give up the practice very soon. The inclusive political structure, however, would be helpful.

The biggest challenge facing Myanmar on the political front is its 2008

constitution. The provisions of the constitution allow 25 percent military nominees in the bicameral parliament at the centre and elected houses in the regions/states. The army-backed ruling party USDP, led by Thein Sein, himself a former military general, is populated with ex-army officers who resigned to join the party before the 2011 election. The Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) nominates the Defence, Home, and Border Affairs ministers. The Myanmar President can also declare an emergency by following a procedure constitutionally laid down and the C-in-C can take over both executive and judicial powers.

It would be in India's interest to focus on areas West of Irrawady River and South to strengthen bilateral relations.

Myanmar will take time to evolve as a democratic federal state with equal opportunities for all. Two important political challenges are (a) absorption of tribal and communal minorities, and (b) civilian empowerment. As I write this paper (June 2012), it is evident that the Thein Sein Government has not yet been able to fully control sectarian violence between the Buddhists and Bengali speaking Rhongya Muslims in Rakhine State. Its version of democracy, so far, is a far cry from that known to us. But India's continued engagement will ensure that the inclusive democratic movement is not reversed. It also needs to be noted that no one has so far been vocal about bringing to justice Myanmar's generals. Even Aung San Suu Kyi is being practical. She has skirted the whole issue with tact. Any precipitate action against the generals can reverse the political progress and destabilise Myanmar.

The current round of sanctions on Myanmar, lifted or suspended, provides enough opportunity for economic activity to surge. The country has already displayed the courage not to sink any deeper into a Chinese orbit. Considering the fact that President Thein Sein must had to battle the hardliners, the road ahead requires constant vigil as well as rewarding incentives. India's support to Myanmar in lifting of sanctions can become a major opportunity for establishing a lasting political, economic and social relationship. India can help Myanmar in political reforms and a sustainable constitutional order. That would be helpful not for Myanmar but also for the Northeast regional stability. Besides, a democratic, independent minded Myanmar is more likely to lean towards India than China.

At present, Myanmar's trade with India is worth \$ 1 billion; with China it is worth \$3.5 billion. In 2011, China invested \$13.5 billion in Myanmar, largely in infrastructure, mining, energy and manufacturing sectors. It has started work on twin oil and natural gas pipelines, stretching 1060 km from Kyaukpyu Port in the

Bay of Bengal to Kunming, capital of Yunnan. These pipelines will allow China to bring home fuel supplies from the Middle East and Africa without taking the long route via the Straits of Malacca. Recently, the government has suspended China backed \$3.6 billion Myitsone dam hydel power project on the Irrawady River in Kachin State, which was to supply power to Yunnan. Some such political actions indicate that Myanmar does not wish to be over dependent on China and is ready to do business with others.

Most importantly, Myanmar possesses resources that are required desperately by India e.g. natural gas, minerals, and pulses. Myanmar has 2.54 trillion cubic meters of natural gas reserves and largest copper mines in Asia. India's public and private sectors can invest in Myanmar's undeveloped secondary and tertiary sectors like educational, telecom and healthcare systems. That can enable binding relationship that can change the economic character of Northeastern India. There is little chance of India becoming an alternative to China in Myanmar. It would be in India's interest to focus on areas West of Irrawady River and South to strengthen bilateral relations through 'trade and investment links, development of border areas, improving connectivity and building capacity and human resource.' In the last 12 years, despite criticism from several domestic and Western quarters, Indo-Myanmar relations have travelled a long way. A steady stream of high level civil and military visits from both sides has enhanced the dialogue and trust, and also created mutually beneficial opportunities.

India is involved in a host of infrastructure and energy projects in Myanmar. It has built a 160 km long Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyoa Road across the Manipur border. It is building a 1200 MW hydel project on Chindwin River. Besides, it has provided high speed data link to many cities. Indian firms are working to develop Myanmar's railway network, including supply of coaches and locos. The Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the Rhi-Tiddim projects (on the anvil), when completed, will have a major economic impact in the region. It can transform India's North-East and bordering region. Development of Sittwe port will allow our Northeastern states to access the port and reduce India's transportation dependency on the security sensitive Siliguri corridor.

In early 2012, Myanmar was part of a 14-nation joint naval exercise with India in the Bay of Bengal aimed at combating piracy and terrorism. As you are aware, the stability of Malacca Straits remains a key concern for the economies of Asia-Pacific including India and Myanmar. China too remains worried about the US naval presence in the region. It views its trans-Burma Shwe pipeline project as a possible solution to its Malacca dilemma.

The Future

From the national security point of view, India's first priority is to work jointly with Myanmar to settle ethnic insurgencies in India's Northeast and North Myanmar. Quite rightly, this was stated in the joint statement issued after Manmohan Singh's meeting with Thein Sein in late May 2012. They 'reaffirmed their shared commitment to fight the scourge of terrorism and insurgent activity in all its forms and manifestations', which included committing that the territories of either country would not be allowed to be used for 'activities inimical to the other including for training, sanctuary and other operation by terrorists and insurgent organisations and their operatives.' In this context, security cooperation between the two countries needs to be upgraded by establishing more frequent border meetings, actionable information sharing, joint patrolling (when necessary) and cooperation on border management. Economic and social development in the region will pay security dividends for India as well as Myanmar.

Myanmar's Tatmadaw, comprise the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force with a total strength of 488,000. The country ranks twelfth in the world for its number of active troops in service. Most of its military weapons and equipment is imported from China, Russia and Ukraine. As already stated, due to limited capacity, the Myanmar government is unable to take major military action against large number of tribal insurgents. It has been able to negotiate ceasefire agreements with most groups. Its negotiations with various groups address the issue of an inclusive political architecture. The inclusive political structure would be helpful for India's national security concerns.

Through interdependent social and economic relations we need to make Myanmar sensitive to our security requirements and neutralise Chinese influence in this region.

India and Myanmar should enhance cooperation in maritime security, particularly in combating piracy, terrorism, gun running and for security of respective island territories. This would require bilateral and multinational arrangements and training. India, being the largest nation in the region, can take the lead to extend assistance for this purpose to Myanmar's naval and coast guard establishments. This would help check further expansion of Chinese maritime activities in the Bay of Bengal.

Considering that the ASEAN counties are not very comfortable with the idea of enhanced cooperation in defence and security due to the China factor, India and Myanmar can coordinate their approaches on the issue of cooperation in ASEAN (India has summit level relations), ASEAN Regional Forum, members of the

ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM+), BIMSTEC and SAARC (Myanmar has an observer status). India and Myanmar have now signed agreements for cooperation between Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies and Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) and Institute of for Defence Studies and Analyses Strategic (IDSA). Both countries will get ample opportunities to exchange views on strategic affairs. India also needs to share its experience in strengthening democratic and multi-ethnic institutions in Myanmar, as we are doing in Afghanistan.

India should look into the following areas to enhance relations with Myanmar and for regional economic prosperity:

- Upgrade security relations between the two countries through strategic dialogues, border management and enhanced cooperation in aerospace and maritime security.
- Declare India's support to Myanmar on lifting of sanctions and getting it full international acceptability.
- Increase investment in Myanmar's economic and social projects in the form of grants and soft loans. This can be utilised to build infrastructure in Myanmar like the Dawei Special Industrial Zone on Myanmar's South Western coast and enhancing connectivity between India, Myanmar and Thailand. A high-level mechanism of officials can be set up to focus on greater connectivity and India's usual problem of inefficient project implementation.
- Enhance people-to-people contacts through easy transportation (bus services), liberalisation of educational and cultural cooperation, development of border areas including tourism infrastructure.
- Establishing Joint Economic Commission to take a comprehensive view of bilateral economic relationship. A forum comprising businessmen on both sides can be set up to increase Indian investments in minerals, energy, and agriculture sectors in Myanmar.
- Share experience in strengthening democratic and multi-ethnic institutions in Myanmar, as we are doing in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Since Independence, India has tended to neglect its East, within and outside its national boundaries. In the West, despite irrational hostility towards us, we have maintained a comprehensive diplomatic dialogue with Pakistan's military dictators. In the East, in spite of historical and cultural relations and important geo-strategic interests; India shied away from a substantive dialogue

with military rulers. It needs to be reiterated that strategy and diplomacy in international relations is based not on sentiments but the art of possibility and the advancement of national interests. Kautilya had stated “When the interests of the country are involved, ethics are a burdensome irrelevance”. India is now on the right side of history and pragmatism displayed in the 1990s may bear fruit and reduce the gap between *realpolitik* and sentiment. Another lesson that India has learnt from this experience is the utility of military diplomacy to supplement our foreign policy endeavors.

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