

Why India Needs Myanmar on Its Side

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'China has made rapid advances into Myanmar.... Radars have been reported to have been erected on Myanmar's west coast to monitor Indian missile tests,' notes Brigadier Gurmeet Kanwal (ret'd). Senior General Than Shwe, Myanmar's head of State, is currently on his second visit to India in six years. He comes at a time the international community has initiated the first steps to gradually open up to Myanmar and elections are due in that country later this year.

Aung San Suu Kyi, perhaps the most famous prisoner in the world after Nelson Mandela, met Western diplomats in Yangon, including United States Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell in November 2009. Speculation was rife at that time that sanctions would soon be lifted. India's relations with Myanmar, a devoutly Buddhist country, have been traditionally close and friendly. Geographically, India and Myanmar share long land and maritime boundaries, including in the area of the strategically important Andaman and Nicobar islands where the two closest Indian and Myanmar islands are barely 30 km apart.

It is not so well known that Myanmar ports provide India the shortest approach route to several of India's north-eastern states. The first decade of the 21st century has witnessed growing strategic engagement between India and Myanmar. According to the ministry of external affairs, relations with Myanmar have become truly multi-faceted, 'with cooperation in a range of developmental and other projects in the areas of roads, power, hydro-carbon, oil refinery, transmission lines, telecommunications and information technology.'

India's national interest lies in a strong and stable Myanmar that observes strict neutrality between India and China and cooperates with India in the common fight against the insurgencies raging in the border areas of both the countries. For India, Myanmar is a bridge with Southeast Asia. In fact, it is a bridge between the countries comprising the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

(where Myanmar has observer status) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

The key drivers of the India-Myanmar strategic relationship are cooperation in counter-insurgency operations and the need for India to ensure that Myanmar is not driven into Chinese arms through Indian neglect of its security concerns and arms requirements. Indian insurgent groups (NSCN, ULFA and the Manipur rebels among others) have been operating out of bases in the weakly controlled areas across the borders of the Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram and Myanmarese rebels, primarily the Chins and the Arakanese, have often taken shelter on the Indian side.

It is in the interest of both countries to cooperate with each other to fight these insurgent groups in a coordinated manner. In April-May 1995, during Operation Golden Bird, a joint operation, approximately 40 insurgents were been killed and a huge cache of arms was recovered. Since then the two armies have been cooperating with each other for mutual benefit. In November 2001, the Myanmar army had raided several Manipuri rebel bases, rounded up almost 200 rebels and recovered 1,500 guns.

India-Myanmar cooperation is also essential to control narcotics trafficking and to curb the proliferation of small arms in the region. China has made rapid advances into Myanmar and established close political, military and economic relations. Myanmar provides China the shortest land route access to the northern Indian Ocean. China has signed a long-term agreement with Myanmar for the exploitation of its hydrocarbon reserves and for the transportation of oil and gas through a 1,100 km overland pipeline from Kyaukryu port in Myanmar to the border city of Ruili in Yunnan. This pipeline will reduce the distance by 1,200 km and make China less dependent on the Malacca Straits.

China is also developing Sittwe as a commercial port on the west coast. It is natural that Chinese naval activity in the Bay of Bengal will soon follow. China has also been stepping up arms sales to Myanmar as other nations, including India, are loath to sell offensive military hardware to the country. China is reported to have told Myanmar to take artillery guns from North Korea in return for rice.

Radars have been reported to have been erected on Myanmar's west coast to monitor Indian missile tests. This is not a positive development, as it will further increase Myanmar's dependency on China. However, indications from the military regime are that it does not want China to exercise undue influence in Myanmar's internal affairs.

Recent reports of Myanmar's quest for the acquisition of nuclear weapons

from North Korea (with Chinese and Pakistani help), though uncorroborated, are of concern to India as nuclear weapons in the hands of yet another military regime would not be conducive to long-term strategic stability in South Asia. If the news about Myanmar's nuclear ambitions is true, the international community must adopt all measures necessary to prevent the emergence of another nuclear weapon State in the region and India must help.

While India is concerned with the slow pace of progress on the issue of national reconciliation and the consequent delay in installing a democratically elected government in power in Yangon, the strategic scenario compels India to balance its security concerns with its support for the emergence of democratic rule. It is only through close engagement that India can promote leverages with the ruling regime to nudge it gently towards national reconciliation. India must also increase its economic footprint in Myanmar, particularly in areas that are contiguous to India. The military regime is firmly entrenched in power -- the monks' agitation notwithstanding. Sanctions and other diplomatic pressures have not worked in the past and are unlikely to work in the future.

The fear psychosis of Myanmar's military junta is being exploited by China and this cannot be in the interest of either India or any of the other democracies of the free world. It is important to end Myanmar's isolation and to allay its fears that the whole world is ganging up against it. India and the other regional powers can play a positive role in the re-entry of Myanmar into the international mainstream so that it can be nudged towards becoming a strong and stable democracy that is also mature and responsible and willing to play by the rules and traditions governing international relations. Perhaps multi-national talks, which include India, China, Japan, ASEAN and other stakeholders, would be the best way forward.

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