



Emerging Trends in India–Myanmar Relations

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Myanmar is an important neighbour of India as it shares extensive land borders with India's north-eastern states and maritime borders in the Bay of Bengal. The long spell of Myanmar's military rule forced India to follow a policy of disengagement with the Burmese authorities. It was only after India initiated its "Look East" policy in the 1990s New Delhi started its engagement with the military junta. Moreover, the recent democratisation of Myanmar has the potential to take India–Myanmar relations to a new height.

Introduction

*"The defence of Burma in fact is the defence of India and it is India's primary concern no less than Burma's to see that its frontiers remain inviolate. In fact, no responsibility can be considered too heavy for India when it comes to the question of defending Burma."*¹

– K. M. Panikar (1945)

Myanmar² is going through an "unprecedented" political and socio-cultural transformation, especially after the November 2010 general elections. The new

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“civilian” government under the leadership of President Thein Sein advocated a reformist agenda, which compels not only Western countries but also India to recalibrate its Myanmar policy. During the past five decades of military rule, the country witnessed suppression of democratic norms/institutions, human rights violations, armed insurgencies by the sidelined ethnic minorities, detention of the opposition activists and leaders, especially the Nobel Peace Laureate Ms Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) and the economic policies enforced by the junta which left most of the common people impoverished. At present, approximately 32% of the population lives in poverty and Myanmar is the poorest country in Southeast Asia with a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$82.72 billion (2011 est.).³

Myanmar’s ongoing democratisation led the Indian Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, to Naypyidaw on a three-day state visit on May 27–29, 2012. The visit was a historic milestone in the relations between India and Myanmar as this was the first prime ministerial visit in the 25 years, since the then Indian Prime Minister, Shri Rajiv Gandhi, visited Myanmar in 1987. During the visit (May 2012), both Manmohan Singh and Thein Sein comprehensively reviewed the multifaceted bilateral relationship and took stock of developments since the very successful state visit of President Thein Sein to India in October 2011. They expressed satisfaction at the ongoing official exchanges and the growing economic, trade and cultural ties, as well as people-to-people exchanges.⁴

The two leaders agreed on a vision for the future in the pursuit of the common agenda at the bilateral, regional and global level. They agreed to cooperate in the areas such as border area development, transportation, connectivity, agriculture, trade and investment, promotion of friendly exchanges and human resource development. They signed 12 Memorandums of Understanding/Agreements in this regard (see Table 1).

The two leaders underscored that the bilateral relations between India and Myanmar are rooted in shared history and geography, culture and civilisation. The bilateral trade between both countries increased significantly from US\$12.4 million in 1980–1981 to US\$1.3 billion in 2011–12 and during the visit, both the leaders alluded to the mutually agreed target of doubling the bilateral trade by 2015.⁵

Both, India and Myanmar have had their own distinct problems in the past. Now, at this crucial juncture, especially in this globalised world their economy is going through a critical stage and therefore, they need each other’s support to achieve their respective goals in the global arena by fostering bilateral relations. Hence, this

Table 1. Memorandums of Understanding/Agreements signed between India and Myanmar.

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1. Regarding \$500 million Credit Line between Export–Import Bank of India and Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank
 2. India–Myanmar Border Area Development
 3. Air Services Agreement between India and Myanmar
 4. Cultural Exchange Programme 2012–2015
 5. Setting up of Myanmar Institute of Information Technology (MIIT)
 6. Establishing Border Haats across the Border between India and Myanmar
 7. Establishment of Joint Trade and Investment Forum
 8. Establishment of the Advance Centre for Agriculture Research and Education (ACARE), Yezin Agriculture University, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar
 9. Establishment of a Rice Bio Park (Paddy and Rural Prosperity) at Department of Agriculture Research, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar
 10. Cooperation between Calcutta University, Kolkata, and Dagon University, Yangon
 11. Cooperation between the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) and Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS)
 12. Cooperation between Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA) and Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS)
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Source: “List of Documents Signed during State Visit of Prime Minister to Myanmar,” Ministry of External Affairs, May 28, 2012, <http://meaindia.nic.in/meaxpsite/declarestatement/2012/05/28js01.pdf> (accessed May 29, 2012).

paper is an attempt to critically evaluate India’s Myanmar policy and various dimensions/phases of India–Myanmar relations. It will examine India’s interest in Myanmar with the backdrop of India’s ‘Look East’ policy. It will also discuss Myanmar’s democratisation process and its impact on the region. In addition, the paper will study the role of the Indian diaspora in influencing the bilateral relations of India and Myanmar.

Historical Background

India has a long historical relationship with Myanmar since antiquity. Myanmar also came under the spell of Indian cultural influence, as Buddhism spread directly from India, profoundly influencing all spheres of Burmese life.⁶ After the end of the third Anglo-Burmese War in 1886, the British integrated the entire Burmese territory with

the Indian Empire and ruled the Burma province directly from Calcutta, and after 1911, from Delhi. Being the largest and richest province in British India, Burma was formally separated in April 1937. However, the colonial government's unrestricted immigration policy continued and from the mid-1800s till independence, people migrated from India to settle in Burma, particularly in Rangoon.⁷

During the three Anglo-Burmese wars fought in 1824–1826, 1852 and 1885, the British used Indians in their army to subdue the royal forces of the Burmese. Consequentially, the affair sowed the seeds of Burma's prejudice and grievances against Indians and India, fuelling nationalist fervour in the 20th century.⁸ Most of the ethnic Indians migrated to Burma under the British colonial rule, numbering 300,000–400,000, and engaged themselves in the bureaucracy, police and military.⁹

The Indian population grew rapidly and crossed the half-million mark by the turn of the century, i.e. 1901.¹⁰ In 1931 Indians represented 7.5% of the total population of Burma and on the eve of the Japanese invasion in 1941 numbered over 1.1 million.¹¹ Indians were very hard-working and their hard labour resulted in turning Burma into one of the richest nations in Southeast Asia at that time. However, it led to the envy of indigenous people and this in due course became a serious matter against the Indian diaspora. Thereafter, anti-Indian sentiments were high and the slogan: "Burma for the Burmans", voiced by the nationalist forces, was directed mainly against the Indians.¹²

During World War II, British Burma became a battlefield between the allied forces and the Japan. Most of the Indians as well as indigenous people lost their wealth and belongings in looting and war damage. On the other hand, in a bid to liberate India, the Indian National Army (INA) under the leadership of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose seeking Japanese assistance, created a difficult situation for the Indians in Japanese occupied Burma. However, on Netaji's birthday in January 1945 the Indian community in Rangoon demonstrated their trust and confidence in the INA by organising a massive rally, donating gold and jewellery in large quantities for enduring India's freedom struggle. In his message to the ethnic Indians in Burma Netaji said:

*"When the history of India's last war of independence comes to be written, Indians in Burma will have an honoured place in this history."*¹³

On the eve of Burmese independence, the leader of Burma acted in vengeance, censoring the rights of Indians not only over land, but over their existence in the country as well. The Burmese government passed a Citizenship Act in 1948, according to which every Indian migrant in Burma was required to have citizenship certificate. The process of extending citizenship in Burma was made cumbersome and complicated to such extent that only 7994 Indians out of 740,000 got this certificate. The rest of them were declared illegal migrants and stateless.¹⁴

After its independence, Burma made it difficult for Indians to continue their service in the bureaucracy. In 1953, about 3000 Indians in the government services and 8500 in the Burma railways were dismissed. An Immigration Act was passed by the government of Burma which imposed restrictions on the movements of Indians. The government's discouragement of foreigners to retain properties in the country mostly affected the Indian landlords and businessmen. The Burmese authority took systematic steps to hurt Indians. Wherever they worked, i.e. in administration, business, medical and engineering services, they were compelled to resign.¹⁵ Therefore, most of the ethnic Indians, especially the "affluent" fled Myanmar and those left behind were the poor working class, who had nowhere to go, as well as some remnants of the trading community. The present Indian community in Myanmar is, by and large, composed of these people. A large population of Indian origin (according to the 2001 report of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora, the total number of ethnic Indians in Myanmar is estimated to be around 2.9 million) lives in Myanmar without having any political rights or recognition.¹⁶

India and Myanmar cooperated in their struggle for independence and their independence came only a few months apart. India established diplomatic relations with Myanmar soon after its independence in 1948 and signed a Treaty of Friendship in 1951.¹⁷ India provided considerable support to Myanmar when it struggled with regional insurgencies. However, the overthrow of the democratic government by the military of Myanmar led to strains in ties. Thereafter, the biggest cause of contention between the two countries was the fate of the People of Indian Origin (PIOs), who were being treated as foreigners despite having lived in Burma for generations. Initially, Shri Jawaharlal Nehru insisted on compensation for the PIOs, but soon reverted to the Nehruvian policy of not pushing Indian interests by claiming special

privileges for Indians in Myanmar, in order to maintain good relations between the two countries.¹⁸

India followed the policy of disassociation with regard to its diaspora not only for the Burmese Indians but across the globe. The basic principles of India's foreign policy were laid during the independence under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1957, Nehru stated:

*“Indians abroad should always give primary consideration to the interest of the people of those countries; they should never allow themselves to be placed in a position of exploiting the people of those countries; in fact, we have gone thus far and said, if you cannot be, and if you are not, friendly to the people of that country, come back to India and do not spoil the fair name of India.”*¹⁹

This statement reflected the importance that he attached to the positive role the overseas Indians could play by assimilating themselves in the host countries. Jawaharlal Nehru did not want the presence of Indians to have a negative impact on India's relations with the host countries.

India–Myanmar Relations: Different Phases

India–Myanmar relations can be divided into five different phases: 1948–1962; 1962–1988; 1988–1992; 1993–2010; and 2010 till date.

First Phase (1948–1962): The first government of independent Myanmar enjoyed good relations with India, due to the close personal relationship between Prime Ministers U Nu and Jawaharlal Nehru. The relationship between Burma and India at that time was so informal that the Burmese prime minister and other members of the Burmese government were welcome in Delhi whenever they chose to discuss problems with Shri Nehru and the Government of India. Apart from all this, U Nu and Nehru shared a common world view. Both were strong advocates of Asian solidarity. Burma and India participated in a number of Asian conferences and their leaders championed the cause of Asia in these conferences. Generally speaking, both Burma and India pursued a course of non-alignment in world affairs.²⁰ The friendship between Myanmar and India during 1948–1962 served the interests of

both countries. However, the relationship cooled when General Ne Win came to power by staging a military coup on March 2, 1962.

Second Phase (1962–1988): The second phase may be described as a period of *cold relations* as an undemocratic regime had taken over power in Myanmar. Due to the Nehruvian idealist position, New Delhi ignored its eastern neighbour.²¹ However, the military junta too opted for living in isolation that lasted almost three decades.²² A Sino-Indian border conflict broke out in October 1962. Myanmar showed a neutral stand on the issue, not wanting to incur the hostility of either of the two sides. The silence of Myanmar was interpreted as ‘pro-Chinese’ by India and naturally India–Myanmar relations were disturbed. India’s debacle in the 1962 Sino-Indian border conflict also resulted in the Myanmar military government’s tilt towards China. Myanmar also left the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1979.²³ Relations improved slightly during the 1970s and 1980s with both countries trading official visits with Indira Gandhi visiting Rangoon in 1969, Minister of External Affairs, A. B. Vajpayee in 1977, Ne Win visiting India in 1980 and Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao reciprocating in 1981. Rajiv Gandhi’s visit in 1987 was the first by an Indian prime minister in almost 19 years.²⁴

Third Phase (1988–1992): During the third phase, relations between India and Myanmar further deteriorated as India became the first Asian government to publicly criticise the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). India initially took an approach similar to that of Western countries and scaled down its diplomatic contacts with Myanmar. New Delhi also offered direct support for the pro-democracy movement by accepting political refugees and allowing them to continue their activities. The Indian Embassy in Rangoon was active in helping pro-democracy activists and officials were in touch with opposition groups like the All Burma Federation of Students’ Unions (ABFSU) and opposition figures like Aung San Suu Kyi and U Nu during the uprising.²⁵

The Indian Government, along with the United States and Western countries, isolated the Myanmar’s military regime. New Delhi was the sponsor of a United Nations (UN) resolution condemning the military junta of Myanmar for its violations of human rights in 1992. When the National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory in the 1990 general election, the Burmese government intensified the crackdown on the democratic activists, in general, and the NLD in particular.²⁶ Ms Aung San Suu Kyi was put under the house arrest in 1990.

India advocated her release openly and in July 1992, Myanmar's opposition National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) was allowed to open its office on Indian soil. These steps further deteriorated relations as Myanmar saw these steps as blatant interference in its internal affairs.²⁷

Fourth Phase (1993–2010): In this phase, New Delhi initiated a policy of engagement with Myanmar. However, between 1991 and 1992, the foreign policy establishment in India started reviewing its foreign policy towards Myanmar. One factor that prompted the Indian policymakers to review Burma policy was the problems at the border with Burma.²⁸ New Delhi initiated its ambitious 'Look East' policy to enhance their bilateral and multilateral relations with the Southeast Asian countries and Myanmar was one of them. Another factor behind the policy review was that India after 1990 wanted to move faster towards "globalisation" and for that it was essential to have closer economic cooperation with its neighbours, including Myanmar. It was also noted that the policy of "constructive engagement" with the military regime of Myanmar started only with the advent of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government and the subsequent Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) followed suit. Following the catastrophic cyclone Nargis which hit Myanmar in May 2008, India responded immediately with relief materials and offers of assistance in which the Indian Navy played a crucial role. Recently, India also announced assistance of US\$1 million for humanitarian relief and rehabilitation in the areas affected by the severe earthquake in Shan State in March 2011.²⁹

Fifth Phase (2010–to date): The fifth phase of India–Myanmar relations started soon after the November 2010 general elections, which ended the decades-old era of military rule in Myanmar. The democratisation of Myanmar encouraged New Delhi to pursue its Myanmar's policy more proactively. India anticipates that if Naypyidaw continues with democracy, it may redefine their bilateral relations.

At present, both New Delhi and Naypyidaw are engaged with each other on regional and sub-regional context through Mekong-Ganga Co-operation (MGC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). In August 2008, Myanmar was given the "observer status" in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) with India's help and now Myanmar is eyeing SAARC's

permanent membership as the country is geographically a part of extended South Asia region.³⁰

In the 16th SAARC summit at Thimphu (2010), Myanmar participated as an observer state. During the summit, U Nyan Win, Myanmar's Foreign Affairs Minister said:

*“Myanmar’s close co-operation with SAARC will provide us the opportunity to serve as the gateway for South Asia to Southeast Asia, and also to East Asian countries for the common benefit of the people in the region.”*³¹

Giving an opportunity to Myanmar to be a part of South Asian grouping will provide the country with world-wide recognition and also increase its responsibility at the international platform. India should “whole-heartedly” support Myanmar's entry into the SAARC, as it will prove mutually promising for engagement at a strategic as well as economic level.

Myanmar's bid for the entry into SAARC has not been seen differently as India and Myanmar share a long land border of over 1600 km and a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal. India's maritime south-eastern trade routes border, Myanmar's territorial waters, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands where India has naval and air facilities are much closer to the Burmese coast than to the coastal states of eastern India. Myanmar is the largest country touching India's eastern border and acts as a buffer state between India's north-eastern region and the Chinese provinces. Myanmar is extremely rich in natural resources, notably oil and gas. Therefore, cordial relations with Myanmar can facilitate India's energy requirements.³²

India's Myanmar Policy: Driving Factors

There are mainly seven factors behind the redrafting of India's Myanmar policy: growing Chinese influence in Myanmar, stability of the north-eastern region of India, India's quest for energy, Connectivity, Indian Diaspora, Maritime Cooperation and India's “Look East” policy. If New Delhi can work enthusiastically on these aspects, the bilateral relations with Naypyidaw will improve significantly, especially in the field of trade, people to people contact, defence, etc.

The China Factor

It has been believed that India's pro-democracy stance had driven Myanmar to China's den. Myanmar's increasing economic and military relations with Beijing are a cause of concern to New Delhi. Scholars like Renaud Egreteau argue that 1993 indeed was the year when the "realist U turn" took place in India's policy towards Myanmar and there are several factors were responsible for this, including the China factor. "The fact that the dragon had filled the diplomatic vacuum by intensifying its relationship with Myanmar since the late 1980s was not lost on India".³³

China has been heavily involved in Myanmar since, 1980s. Renaud Egreteau stated that the advent of the new junta in Yangon after the 1988 uprising and the 1989 Tiananmen massacre made the two nations seek mutual relations in the face of world isolation and criticism. The relationship started with a trade agreement in order to open up the provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan, which are linked with Myanmar through the Irrawaddy River and road and rail links. There are large numbers of Chinese investors and traders throughout the northern Myanmar.³⁴

After the Sino-Indian War of 1962, New Delhi has been cautious with regard to Beijing. China has for a long time given a wide and open support to various Indian insurgents groups, notably those which claimed to follow the Maoist ideology in the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, Beijing militarised Tibet and claimed Arunachal Pradesh as its own territory that panicked New Delhi. Consequently, India realised that it needs to improve its relations with Myanmar so as to prevent China from benefitting solely from the economic and strategic relationship. This policy has resulted in India re-opening its consulate in Mandalay, where the Chinese government already has a consulate.³⁵

China is also helping Myanmar to modernise its naval bases, namely Haggai, the Coco Islands, Akyab and Mergui to increase its footprint in the Indian Ocean. India has been particularly nervous about a rumoured intelligence listening post on the Coco Islands, only 30 nautical miles away from its own naval bases on the Andaman and Nicobar islands. During 1984 to 1994 Myanmar signed two huge arms deals with China. Beijing supplied the Burmese Army (Tatmadaw) with weapons in abundance at low cost and it took only a few years for China to get a strong foothold in Myanmar.³⁶

Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray mentioned that "being a largest supplier of weapons to Myanmar, China also provides the Myanmar Army with training in the technical use

of weapons and weapon systems. Goods bought from China over the years have included armoured personnel carriers, tanks, fighter aircraft, radar systems, ammunition, surface-to-air missiles and short-range air to air missile systems”.³⁷ Keeping good relations with Myanmar serves China’s own interest as Beijing’s intention was to secure access to the Bay of Bengal, especially in case of a blockade in the South China Sea or in Malacca Straits in which China is heavily dependent for its developmental activity. Therefore, India is nervous about being encircled by China through its so-called “Strings of Pearls Strategy”.

Dr Marie Lall noted that “China has cultivated its economic and military ties with Pakistan and their involvement with Myanmar could mean that India would find itself surrounded on three sides by Beijing and its area of influence leaving no ‘buffer states’.”³⁸ Therefore, it is in India’s interest to balance Chinese growing influence in Myanmar by dealing with both Naypyidaw and Beijing carefully instead of opposing head-on the Burmese authorities.

Internal Security

Most of the India’s north-eastern states witnessed insurgency movements in their area with the demands ranging from independence to autonomy. Estimates indicate that the number of such groups could be as high as 130. However, the number of insurgencies has gone down but still continues to impact the internal security and integrity of the region. The remoteness of the north-eastern region and years of neglect and apathy by the New Delhi have led to a feeling of alienation in the psyche of people of this region. This constantly feeds these armed movements.³⁹

These groups include both factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the Mizo National Front and Manipur insurgent groups. However, in 1986, the Mizo National Front signed the Mizoram Peace Accord with the Government of India and today they are the main opposition party in Mizoram’s state legislative assembly. However, India wants cooperation from the Burmese regime to “contain” or “eliminate” these insurgents. Some of the Indian insurgent groups are believed to have established relations with the local Burmese commanders and are thus able to make movements along the border areas. It is also in Burma’s own interests to tackle the insurgency problem, as it has insurgents like the Kachins and the Chins in this area. Although the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) entered a ceasefire with the Burmese government in 1994,

since June 2011 renewed fighting broke out between the KIA and the Burmese Army when the Myanmar government forced ethnic armed groups to join the Burmese government force (BGF) and clashes continues. The Chin National Front (CNF), which was formed to fight for self determination of Chin people in Burma, has its camps inside Indian border.⁴⁰

For maintaining peace in the North-Eastern region, it is in India's internal security interest to keep the momentum going in the right direction with Myanmar. Most of the insurgent groups active in North-Eastern states of India are using the bordering areas of Myanmar as a safe haven. In fact, on December 3, 2011, there were reports that the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA's) top leader Lt. Col. Jibon Moran was arrested in Myanmar along with an Indian journalist.⁴¹ There have been joint military efforts between the two armies to counter insurgency across the border, but it needs to be intensified.

India's Quest for Energy

India's economy is growing rapidly and to sustain this growth, the uninterrupted energy supply is essential. India depends heavily upon west Asian oil but because of political instability and the pro-democracy movement, namely the Arab Spring, it is closely following the developments that are taking place in the west Asian region. And at present when the United States is still pressurising India to delink its energy requirement from Iran, India is confronted with the overwhelming need to diversify its energy sources. Although Myanmar has only a limited potential to satisfy India's energy quest in comparison to west Asia, which enjoys an advantage because of its geographical proximity and the availability of natural gas that is both a cost effective and eco-friendly source of energy, Myanmar is an attractive target for India's energy diplomacy. There is thus an immense possibility for energy cooperation between India and Myanmar, both in the hydropower and the hydrocarbon sector. However, this potential has not been actualised fully so far because of certain political and economic reasons.⁴²

Myanmar's oil and gas reserves are significant for India's future energy requirement, as it has the world's tenth largest natural gas reserves, estimated at over 90 Trillion Cubic Feet (TCF) in 19 onshore and three major offshore fields. According to Myanmar officials, the country's daily gas production will almost double to 2.235 billion cubic feet by 2015 from the current 1.215 billion cubic

feet.⁴³ Despite the reluctance from the western world, Indian companies namely the ONGC Videsh Ltd. (OVL), GAIL and ESSAR are participants in the energy sector in Myanmar. OVL and GAIL hold a 30% stake in the exploration and production in Myanmar's A-1 and A-3 offshore blocks. ONGC and GAIL have also invested in the pipeline being constructed by China. ESSAR had signed a production sharing contract with Naypyidaw for two contiguous offshore blocks (Block A-2) and adjoining block on land (Block-L) in 2005.⁴⁴

In January 2004, the natural gas field discovered near Sittwe was estimated to contain between 2.9 trillion and 3.6 trillion cubic feet of recoverable gas. The Indian government immediately offered to buy that gas and proposed to build a gas pipeline from Sittwe to Kolkata through Bangladesh. In mid-January 2005, the energy ministers of Myanmar, India and Bangladesh reached an agreement in principle on the construction of the pipeline and agreed to sign a formal contract in March the same year. When India and Bangladesh failed to agree on the terms for constructing the pipeline, the Myanmar government instead sold the natural gas to Chinese companies.⁴⁵ In spite of unpleasant developments like this it is essential for New Delhi to remain engaged with Myanmar to fulfil its energy requirements. In addition, India can extend its scientific know-how and technological prowess and invest in exploration and production in Myanmar's oil and gas fields.

Connectivity

India sees connectivity through Myanmar as crucial for its Look East Policy and for the development of stronger ties with the ASEAN countries. At present, both India and Myanmar are jointly working on several projects both in infrastructural and non-infrastructural areas, including the up-gradation and resurfacing of the 160 km-long Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo road, construction and up-gradation of the Rhi-Tiddim Road in Myanmar, etc. India is implementing the Kaladan multimodal transport project that involves upgrading the Sittwe port in Myanmar and constructing a highway to connect the town of Paletwa in Chin state to the Indian border in Mizoram state. This flagship project will revitalize the economy of the area and link it with important commercial and shipping arteries and it is expected to be complete by 2015. The Chief Secretary of Manipur also announced the long-awaited luxury bus service between Imphal and Mandalay, to be launched soon, which will be the first proper link between India and Myanmar.⁴⁶ This connectivity holds the potential

to integrate India's North-Eastern region with the broader ASEAN's inter-connectivity effort in future, with consequential benefits for both, India and Myanmar.

Indian Diaspora

Diasporas have emerged as a powerful factor in developing relations between nation-states. The Indian Diaspora has notably acted as a catalyst in strengthening bilateral relations between India and the host nations. The Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal is a case in point, as ethnic Indians in United States successfully lobbied for clinching of the N-deal. However, the recent incidents of maltreatment of the ethnic Indians in Australia and Malaysia seem to have gone against the general trend of having contributed to the strengthening of relations between India and the host countries. Relations with Myanmar, which has a significant number of ethnic Indians and the Diaspora, too can go either way.

Maritime Cooperation

The growing influence of China in the Indian Ocean Region and in Southeast Asia is a critical reason for both the countries to engage strategically. China has strengthened its naval presence in the South China Sea and is endeavouring to do the same in the Indian Ocean. It has reportedly installed a listening post in the Burmese territory of Coco Islands and thus is aiming to establish its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean Region purportedly through the *String of Pearls* strategy. Recently, China has also deployed its first aircraft carrier *Liaoning* in the region. Myanmar's Navy is operating in the Bay of Bengal and India does not want hostile relations with this neighbour, as Naypyidaw shares good relations with Beijing. Chinese Navy is already looking for a strong base in the Bay of Bengal and if Myanmar 'allows' Chinese naval forces to have access to the Bay of Bengal, it would be a major threat for India's security. However, Indian Navy is facilitating in extending India's 'Look East' policy by organising *Milan* maritime exercises once in every two years in which most of the ASEAN countries participates. Since 2003, Myanmar has been a regular participant.⁴⁷ India and Myanmar are facing a number of non-traditional security challenges in the Bay of Bengal. If the navies of both the countries work jointly, they can curb most of the illegal activities in the region namely illegal fishing, terrorism, arms smuggling, drug and human trafficking. India can also help Myanmar's Navy in capacity-building.

Look East Policy

In the 1990s, the then Indian Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao, as part of the economic liberalisation policy, initiated the Look East Policy for developing strategic and economic relations with the Southeast Asian countries and later this policy was also extended to the East Asian and the Pacific countries. 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.

The turnaround of India's attitude towards the Burmese generals in the mid-1990s, the entry of Myanmar into the ASEAN club in 1997, along with the integration of Myanmar in India's Look East policy was hailed as a very promising development. It is the success of India's Look East policy that led to the mushrooming of several institutional projects that were set up in the region, with Myanmar being the geographical node like the BIMSTEC, MGC and the Kunming Initiative. India chose to engage Myanmar and work closely with it through these regional organisations. India's Look East policy pulled the bilateral relations of India and Myanmar out of their doldrums it had been languishing in for long years.⁴⁸ India considers Myanmar as a gateway to ASEAN and the success of India's Look East policy will largely depend on New Delhi's engagement with Naypyidaw.

The Winds of Change in Myanmar

The winds of change in Myanmar started soon after the November 2010 general elections, which ended the decades-old era of military rule in the country. The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) were declared victorious. However, the international community and United Nations expressed doubts over the credibility of the election results and termed it as a "sham". In fact, some of the clauses in the 2008 constitution or the third constitution of Myanmar, promulgated by the junta before the elections, barred ASSK, the country's prominent pro-democratic face, from contesting the elections. Consequently, her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) boycotted the elections saying electoral laws were "unfair".⁴⁹

No one expected any reforms under the new "nominally" civilian government. But the former military rulers surprised their critics by introducing political changes that were unthinkable just few months ago. Thein Sein, the newly elected president

has advocated a reformist agenda, and has reached out to ASSK (she has been agitating for democracy in Myanmar since more than 20 years and spent almost last 15 years under house arrest). He has gone ahead and established the National Human Rights Commission, implemented a new labour law in consultation with the International Labour Organisation, relaxed restrictions on the media, allowed some economic liberalisation and released of hundreds of political prisoners. Although, the reasons behind this sudden shift remain unclear, but it is believed that the government introduced political reform in order to secure support for Myanmar's bid for the 2014 ASEAN chairmanship.⁵⁰

The recent reforms that include amendments in electoral laws have encouraged ASSK and her party NLD to contest the by-elections. Exceeding all expectations, including her own, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won 43 out of 45 seats in April 1, 2012, by-polls, including in the administrative capital, Naypyidaw.⁵¹

The President of Myanmar Thein Sein ordered a ceasefire in Kachin State in December 2011 and the recently signed deal in the southern Shan state, is a major step forward. There is speculation that almost all political prisoners in Myanmar will be given amnesty at the earliest. This could be an overt way of meeting international community's demand, as Hillary Clinton said on a recent visit to Myanmar, Washington wants to see an end to the decades of fighting with rebel groups before it normalises relations with Naypyidaw.⁵²

The democratisation process in Myanmar also resulted in the historic three-day visit of US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, from November 30–December 2, 2011. She was the first US foreign policy chief to visit Myanmar in more than half a century, since the then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles visited the country in 1955.

During her visit, Clinton notably met Myanmar's President Thein Sein and praised the pro-democratic reforms initiated by the new government and urged Naypyidaw to take further steps towards national reconciliation by releasing remaining political prisoners and end ethnic conflicts. She also reminded that the better ties would be impossible unless Myanmar breaks off its military ties and suspected nuclear links with North Korea. She told Thein Sein that the United States will support more aid for Myanmar and consider re-establishing ambassador-level contact with Naypyidaw, after a lull of two decades, and would also consider easing

sanctions if the government shows genuine reforms progress. Balancing both the ruling and the opposition party, Clinton also met ASSK in Yangon.⁵³

The United States now appears to be recalibrating its policy vis-à-vis Myanmar as over the time Washington has realised that the policy of imposing economic sanctions proved counter-productive and rather it motivated Naypyidaw to seek closer ties with Beijing. The maritime manoeuvre of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy in the South China Sea also encouraged the United States to shift its policy framework from west Asia to the Indo-Pacific, where most countries are concerned about the growing Chinese assertiveness. Therefore, to balance China in the region, the United States is strengthening its alliances and if Myanmar could be made to realign more towards the West, it would be a major game-changer in the region.

Emerging Trends in India–Myanmar Relations

The newly elected President of Myanmar Thein Sein paid a state visit to India on October 12–15, 2011. During the visit India congratulated Myanmar on their transition towards democracy and offered all necessary assistance in further strengthening this transition, in an inclusive and broad-based manner. During Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visit to Myanmar (May 27–29, 2012), both the leaders welcomed the range and frequency of engagement between the two countries that had intensified significantly since Myanmar's transition towards a more democratic form of government in March 2011 and they committed to further enhancing these exchanges so as to take bilateral cooperation to a higher level. The two leaders expressed satisfaction at the recent successful visits from Myanmar including that of the Foreign Minister of Myanmar U Wunna Maung Lwin in January 2012; the Minister of Construction of Myanmar U Khin Maung Myint in February 2012; and from India including the visit of the Minister for Water Resources and Parliamentary Affairs of India Mr P.K. Bansal to Myanmar in February 2012. The two sides agreed to continue with the frequent exchanges of visits at the leadership level.⁵⁴

Both leaders reaffirmed their shared commitment to fight the scourge of terrorism and insurgent activity in all its forms and manifestations. Both of them emphasised the need for enhanced cooperation between security forces and border guarding agencies for securing peace, security and stability in the border areas, which was crucial for their overall development. In this context, the two leaders welcomed the

holding of the first meeting of the bilateral Regional Border Committee whose deliberations were useful in promoting such cooperation and understanding for better border management. Both leaders reiterated the assurance that territories of either country would not be allowed to be used for activities inimical to the other, including for training, sanctuary and other operations by terrorist and insurgent organisations and their operatives.⁵⁵

It is also interesting to note the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Liu Weimin commented positively on the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's recent visit to Myanmar. He stated that "both India and Myanmar are China's friendly neighbours, Beijing is happy to see the development of friendly relations between India and Myanmar, and we hope such development of friendly relations will be conducive to the stability and prosperity of the whole region."⁵⁶

The Chinese analysts believe that India is far less a threat to China's interests in Myanmar than the United States, whose moves to re-engage with Myanmar have stirred much debate in the state media. Ye Hailin, a South Asia scholar with the influential Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), pointed out in an interview with the *Global Times* that India's engagement with Myanmar in terms of trade and investments still trailed that of China and other countries. Ms Ye said:

*"With Myanmar's new openness to the West, dominated by the U.S., and China's ongoing influence in the nation, India has actually been edged out of the main stage while both the U.S. and China are doing whatever they can to gain the favour of economically struggling, strategically-placed Myanmar."*⁵⁷

However, it is very significant to note the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh underlined that "Myanmar is a critical partner in India's Look East policy and is perfectly situated to play the role of an economic bridge between India and China and between South and South-East Asia".⁵⁸ This is the first time the Indian government has acknowledged Myanmar as a link between India and China. Manmohan Singh's May 2012 visit to Myanmar can also be described as New Delhi's first step towards consolidating its big leap in strengthening its bilateral relations with Naypyidaw.

Conclusion

The continuing democratic reforms in Naypyidaw can be seen as “*a new Avatar*” of Myanmar, which could have a positive bearing on the entire region. Like every other nation in this time and age, the future of Myanmar lies in embracing democracy and the transition to this will be possible if the present government peacefully resolves their decades-old ethnic issues. Myanmar’s authorities could favourably consider the demands of revising the 2008 constitution since the ethnic groups find no space for themselves in new constitution. Decentralising the power or adopting the federal structure may help in accommodating all the stakeholders in Myanmar. However, the authorities have their own scepticism over federalism and fear that Myanmar would disintegrate under federalism. Here, New Delhi can help Naypyidaw by sharing her own experiences on the decentralisation of power.

The Indian diaspora in Myanmar can play a crucial role in strengthening India–Myanmar ties. Historically Burma was the richest country of Southeast Asia with the active support of Indian diaspora but today with the absence of Indians, Myanmar has miles to go before it regains the lost status. The Indian diaspora in Myanmar should mobilise the Indian community to start lobbying for Myanmar’s permanent seat in the SAARC, as this will improve their position in the host country. If Myanmar obtains permanent membership in SAARC with India’s support, India will get a platform to engage and interact with Myanmar’s “civilian” regime. Myanmar will also enjoy the benefits of the South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in which trade within the member countries will be duty free. India should try to bring in an amicable solution of the citizenship dispute between the ethnic Indians and the Myanmar’s authority.

It is mutually beneficial for India and the United States to engage with Myanmar as much as possible, as this will automatically lead towards balancing China in the region, notably for maintaining the peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific area. In 2012, India is going to host the India–ASEAN summit at New Delhi and Myanmar will be chairing ASEAN in 2014. This is, therefore, an opportune time for India to substantially, rather than symbolically, recalibrate its foreign policy towards Myanmar. This recalibration can pay rich dividends to its ongoing Look East policy.

As of now, the reformative measures in Myanmar are likely to continue as Naypyidaw would like to live up to ASEAN’s expectations as it will chair the regional

bloc in 2014 and further to legitimate USDP's rule before the next general elections due in 2015. Thereafter, the result of the 2015 general elections will decide the future course of Myanmar. The future of India–Myanmar relations lies in democracy, and if all goes well then the future of Indian diaspora as well as Myanmar will be bright, and once again we will definitely hear the humming of a famous old Hindi film song in Indian families i.e. “*Mere Piya Gaye Rangoon...*”.

Notes

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