



Alternative Strategies towards Myanmar Revising India's Look-east Policy

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It is in New Delhi's best interest to secure Myanmar as a permanent trading and strategic partner due to its geographical advantage. So, when faced with the dilemma of whether to support or oppose the first elections in Myanmar in two decades on 7 November 2010, India chose to align with that country and show it solidarity for this first step towards democracy there. Also, internal disturbances in Myanmar will only result in problems for Indian investments in that country.

As long as there is an armed struggle going on in the trade and commercial centres of Myanmar and US sanctions are in place, there will be impediments to investments in that country. A prosperous Myanmar is in India's best interests. India should therefore, support the call for removal of sanctions on Myanmar because it is due to these sanctions that Myanmar is drawing closer to China.

India's policy on Myanmar saw a paradigm shift from the erstwhile unfriendly relations to a more adaptive and amicable equation in the mid-1990s. A new lease of life has since been infused into the economic and strategic ties between India and Myanmar resulting in over US\$1.4 billion in trade between the two at present. India's present policy has been termed as one of 'constructive engagement' with Myanmar with three primary objectives: curbing Chinese influence in the region, containing criminal and insurgent activities along the India-Myanmar border and establishing physical contact with Southeast Asia under the 'Look East' Policy.

However, is India utilizing this rejuvenation of friendly relations with Myanmar optimally? Is there enough being done to convert Myanmar's rich resource base in India's favour and are these efforts helping both the countries as much as they should? Should India take a more aggressive stance in Myanmar, both economically and strategically? What are the potential areas of cooperation that can be pursued by India in

Myanmar in the future, which will prove to be beneficial for both and strengthen their bilateral ties?.

DEMOCRACY VS NATIONAL INTERESTS: HISTORY OF INDIA-MYANMAR ENGAGEMENT

Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) was the largest British-controlled province in India. Post-1937, Myanmar was declared a separate, independent entity under the British. After independence, Burmese Indians were treated like foreigners with no privileges and were prohibited from acquiring land or owning property. Despite this, relations between the two countries were amicable as the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru and Burmese Prime Minister U Nu cooperated on the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and signed a treaty of friendship.

Following the military takeover by the Tatmadaw in 1962 under Gen. Ne Win, Myanmar isolated itself from the world, especially India. Meanwhile, China's relations with Burma started improving. India-Burma relations nose-dived further when India offered refuge to pro-democracy supporters from that country. In 1989, the Janata Dal-led coalition government caused relations with Myanmar (the name switch had taken place by this time) to further deteriorate with its sharp criticism of the bloody suppression by the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council or SLORC (the pre-cursor to State Peace and Development Council or SPDC) of the student movement that led to an influx of Myanmarese refugees in India.

Post-Cold War, relations somewhat improved again under a Congress (I)-led coalition government in India under its "Look East Policy." Ever since, ties between the two countries have remained friendly. In 1997, when Myanmar became an ASEAN member, India's relations with that country consolidated further

While India supports democracy in general, democracy in Myanmar is an issue that New Delhi

considers an internal matter of that country. India hosts pro-democracy refugees from Myanmar without involving itself in the struggle or voicing criticism for its human rights violations. India was also non-committal in reacting to the anti-government protests in Myanmar in 2007 which were brutally suppressed by the ruling junta or the Kokang repressions in 2009 along the China-Myanmar border. The Indian government under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh still follows the policy of discretion when it comes to Myanmar's internal affairs.

It is significant that India welcomed Gen. Than Shwe in July 2010 despite international opposition. Singh signed five MoUs for cooperation during this visit. A military delegation was also sent in October to Myanmar for bilateral military engagement exercises. On the issue of release of Aung San Suu Kyi also in December 2010, India had to walk a diplomatic tightrope and did not react very significantly. While India is expected to push for a democratic process in Myanmar, Indian national interest cannot be disregarded as Myanmar is India's gateway to Southeast Asia. Therefore, India will continue its engagement with the military junta-backed Union State and Development Party (USDP) which saw a landslide victory in the elections.

India's interests in Myanmar's energy resources have long been welcomed by the junta; however, keeping in mind the structure of coalition politics in India and a resultant apparent lack of initiative due to failure to reach an internal political consensus, it has been an uphill task to pursue these with as much gusto as needed. This has led to an upper hand for China in Myanmar as the Chinese policy in that country is clear and straightforward and aimed at engaging Myanmar strategically and economically, and especially so, for the bordering Yunnan province. Yunnan, which was much neglected and impoverished about a decade ago, as is India's Northeast at present, has now come up as a major economic destination in China due to its trade activities with Myanmar.

Chinese involvement in Myanmar extends all over the country in the economic realm. Myanmar's major chunk of trade is border trade with China

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and Thailand. Moreover, China has made inroads in Myanmar by undertaking several infrastructure projects like road and dam construction. This arrangement allows the Myanmar government access to previously inaccessible interiors of the country where security concerns are high as they provide safe havens for criminals and insurgents. It is in Chinese interest to stabilize Myanmar politically so it is a mutually complementary situation as it gets them economic gains while Myanmar is able to deal with its insurgents better. If India's Northeast was not as disturbed and poorly connected, the ethnic population on the Indian side would also have interacted with their counterparts across the India-Myanmar border as the Chinese are doing by promoting extensive organized border trade.

Myanmar needs both India and China for stability and economic gains which will lead to development. In the 1960s, a lot of ethnic Chinese in Myanmar were killed which resulted in China breaking its ties with Myanmar. But, after the end of the Cold War and the junta takeover in the country, it tried to revive these severed relations because Myanmar wanted support and backup from China against US action and in case of an international backlash. In 2008, for example, the US put forth a resolution in the UN Security Council against Myanmar, of human rights violations in that country. Both, China and Russia came to its aid by vetoing the resolution and asking the US to take it to the General Assembly instead.

This however, does not mean that China is helping Myanmar unconditionally. They are doing this to ensure that the US does not get a chance to set up military capabilities in the China-bordering Shan or Karen States.

India can borrow a leaf from Chinese policies in updating and suitably modifying its own policy towards Myanmar. While there are certain problems in India which China does not face, there are ways to work around them. A beginning has to be made somewhere if India does not want to lose out on the huge opportunities that Myanmar can offer.

II POTENTIAL AREAS OF COOPERATION

Now that the USDP has emerged victorious in the elections in Myanmar, India should look for a more active engagement policy as Myanmar itself has shown an inclination in reducing Chinese influence to a certain extent. Security concerns, US sanctions and instability in that country have led Indian state-run companies like ONGC Videsh Limited to be wary of investing to their full potential in Myanmar. This has worked to the Chinese advantage. At present, India also has few private sectors initiatives in Myanmar like a Tata truck assembly plant. However, there is a largely

profitable computer education centre, in Yangon, run by the Pune-based government-run CDAC. However, there is still a lot that needs to be done. A more proactive and aggressive role by the Indian government in Myanmar's nation-building initiative in infrastructure, communication and transportation sectors is needed. In addition, India could also engage in counter-insurgency training with the Myanmar army.

Infrastructure Development

India needs to push for more involvement in Sittwe and Rakhine (Arakan region). If the government is willing to engage with Iran for energy, it should also show more interest in neighbouring Myanmar and construct a transit route for energy transfers between the two countries. More than energy, India should concentrate on creating a feasible energy transit route since proper transit facilities are also essential. India's interest in infrastructure and development initiatives in Myanmar is an area which has immense potential and with the right political backing, may bring great gains for both the countries. Indian Railways has the fourth-largest network in the world and is one of the largest employers worldwide. In terms of enhancing local connectivity in Myanmar, India could use this experience and establish a viable railway system which would give India some stake in Myanmar's infrastructure.

Also more initiatives like the dam in Chindwin on the Tamanthi River should be initiated from the Indian government's side. This dam which is coming up barely 40km away from the Indian border, will produce 1200MW power initially and 2000MW eventually which Myanmar can sell to India for consumption in India's Northeast. The Myanmar government can also now construct two new dams downstream which will enhance the irrigation capability tremendously in areas like Mandalay. However, this particular project has been delayed 16 years and New Delhi should ensure that these delays are minimized in future projects.

Trade and Border Exchanges

India should also consider improving border trade with Myanmar and create adequate facilities in its Northeast, where most of the India-Myanmar trade takes place. China has the maximum of its trade with Myanmar on their border whereas for India this is not the case. Border trade regulations between India and Myanmar at present are largely impractical. New Delhi may think of devising an alternate model with Sino-Myanmar border trade as base where China treats Myanmar, to an extent, as an extension of Yunnan province which allows for free movement of goods and services between the two countries. If the people on the border areas want to involve

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themselves in barter trade, they should be allowed.

A change in India's concept and philosophy of border trade is required to allow the neighbourhood to be considered an extension of international borders. Also, only two trade points, Moreh and Rhi Falam in India are accessible right now contrary to originally suggested six. A need for infrastructure building on India's borders to facilitate trade activities is one of the most critical needs.

The problem lies on the Indian side due to poor roads and infrastructure for trade. India-Myanmar trade primarily comprises pulses, timber, gems and jewels etc. There is an urgent need for India to widen its scope with regards to trade activity in Myanmar and invest in alternative goods and services as well. One such option is to import fish from Myanmar as fisheries are a big industry there; currently India incurs high costs and cargo charges on transport of fish and fish-products in the Northeast from Gujarat or Maharashtra. Rice as a commodity can also be imported from Myanmar to meet the demand of India's Northeast.

Diaspora and Cultural Linkages

India should pay attention to cultural linkages with Myanmar based on the large Burmese-Indian population in Myanmar and India's position as the country where Buddhism originated. It was evident by Gen. Than Shwe's recent visit to India that holy Buddhist sites in India like Bodh Gaya are equally revered in Myanmar. The script used by the priestly class in Myanmar is Pali, which originated in India.

At present, a large number of Burmese-Indians live in Bago (Zeyawaddy and Kyautaga), Mon, Pyin Lwin, Kalaw and Tanintharyi and are primarily involved in farming and export-import business. However, PIOs in Myanmar are treated as foreigners and non-citizens, banned from public services, military or any government office.

It would be in India's larger interest to perhaps allow the stateless PIOs from Myanmar travel to India on valid travel documents. New Delhi may also be more liberal towards providing scholarships and education opportunities to Burmese-Indian students who wish to come to

India to pursue higher education and make the process simpler for them.

In comparison, while the Sino-Burmese comprise over three per cent of the total population of Myanmar officially, their status is notably higher than that of Burmese-Indians. They are highly educated and have a very large representation in the medical, engineering and academic fields. They are primarily concentrated in the north of Myanmar with a high presence in urban centres like Yangon and Bago as well. The Chinese government recognizes them as ethnic Chinese and grants them several privileges of non-resident Chinese people which makes them more visible and thus, more prosperous in Myanmar. Encouraging friendly relations between similar ethnic tribes like the Kukis and Chins across the border, as is done by China with ethnic Han populations will also work in India's favour.

Soft power in the form of Bollywood films can also be promoted as it is quite popular in Myanmar. The large Indian Diaspora in Myanmar has, in the past, voiced a desire for Indian cultural and language centres as well as cultural exchanges so that they can keep in touch with their roots. During Gen. Ne Win's time, the Indians were poorly treated and badly exploited leaving them impoverished. Now they have the economic resources and a desire to reconnect with their roots that should be capitalized upon to increase Indian influence in Myanmar.

Education

There is a vast scope for India to assist Myanmar in terms of capacity building and training in several areas. Considering that India has compulsory primary education schemes, India could lend support to Myanmar for upgrading its own education system at the primary level by providing assistance in curriculum and syllabus building along with providing resources. Although, India's record with compulsory basic education scheme has come under criticism, it would still be beneficial for both the countries to cooperate on this.

Another area where India can prove helpful is establishing medical facilities and training skilled medical practitioners in Myanmar. India is a sought after destination for medical tourism for inexpensive intricate medical procedures as well as alternate therapies like ayurveda and naturopathy.

India can assist Myanmar in IT education as well. Training programmes, not just in India, but also in Myanmar will help enhance technological and communication capacity in Myanmar. Since, Myanmar is also largely dependent on agriculture like India, New Delhi can run programmes in agriculture technology also which will improve the

agri-processes in Myanmar and give India some inroads in Myanmar.

In September 2010, 26 journalists from Yangon visited India for a government-sponsored two-week training cum exposure programme. This is especially relevant since media in Myanmar is tightly controlled by the junta and a lot of small media establishments have relocated their head offices to India. Moreover, being the largest democracy, for future elections, India can assist Myanmar in setting up democracy in that country by organizing camps for training election officers or voter education camps etc.

IV CONCLUSIONS

India needs to take its role as an emerging world power more seriously in order to be seen as a dependable ally to Myanmar. India-Myanmar relations have changed dramatically ever since India started taking proactive interest in engagement with the country. India's Northeast stands to gain substantially from this engagement policy just as China's Yunnan province did by. However, unlike China, India's policy in Myanmar lacks a basic focus. India's lack of a consolidated comprehensive goal and differences among various political groupings makes matters worse as projects get stalled in the process.

Moreover, despite following the Look East Policy on paper, India's Northeast, which is the crucial connecting point, has remained largely neglected with poor trade and transit infrastructure. Except Moreh, none of the originally suggested transit points are functional. There is a need to shed this myopic vision and chalk out a long-term strategy to engage Myanmar and subsequently, Southeast Asia. A lack of commitment from the Indian side on various projects and the snail's pace at which the existing projects are working increases Chinese advantages.

Aligning with Myanmar is critical for India and it needs to prioritize safeguarding its interests in the immediate neighbourhood before going beyond. The proposed areas of cooperation are also essential confidence-building measures which will lead to the realization of the larger interests of both countries.



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