



A Federal Democratic Myanmar India's Strategic Imperative

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India's Myanmar policy underwent fundamental changes during the early 1990s, when it began courting with the military regime. India declared that the movement for democracy in Myanmar as an internal affair, and it was ready work with 'whoever is in power in Myanmar.' Such an approach, variously dubbed as 'pragmatism,' 'constructive engagement,' or 'inclusive approach,' has been based on two-fold understanding: improbability of ascendancy of democratic regime in Myanmar; and the previous experience of the more India isolates the military regime, the more its geo-strategic concerns are compromised. In other words, India's pragmatism of engaging the military junta in Myanmar seems to have been derived from, what can be termed as the 'TINA factor.'

How sustainable is this TINA policy? Can the Indian government continue for long its policy of, an 'unnatural engagement,' marked by the absence of any common agenda, past record of hostility, and an unreliable partnership?

There is need for a change in India's policy of engagement in the light of changed priorities.

INDIA'S MYANMAR POLICY: SHIFTING PRIORITIES

While India's overall policy outlook towards Myanmar since early 1990s has remained the same, its geo-strategic considerations have seen various additions and omissions in three loosely-differentiated time frames, which can be identified as: security-centric early engagement (1993-1997); Look East-centric engagement (1998-2004); and 'Develop Northeast'-centric engagement (2004 onwards)

The security-centric approach had two important driving forces – Myanmar's drift towards China and the rising spectre of insurgency in the Northeast. In retrospect, India's decision to engage the junta seems to be a strong tactical move to balance China's growing strategic influence over Burma in the wake of reports of China's strategic presence in the Myanmarese islands of Coco, Haingyi, and others. Such an approach also proved to be a prudent move to further sharpen its counter-insurgency operations. There was a certain amount of success, for India, in accomplishing both these objectives.

The 'engage junta' policy acquired important dimension in 1998 with Myanmar as an ASEAN member. India's Look East Policy (LEP) and the formation of the BIMST-EC (Bangladesh-India-Myanmar-Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation) in 1998 played a role here. Myanmar's strategic importance increased considerably not only as a buffer-zone in Sino-Indian rivalry, but also as India's gateway to ASEAN. While enhanced economic interaction and greater connectivity became important driving forces, the existing paranoia regarding the presence of Chinese navy in the Andaman Sea began to subside, due to India's own confidence with the setting up of Far Eastern Naval Command in the Andaman Sea and the lack of veracity of the news of the Chinese naval presence over some of the islands of Myanmar.

Fixation over 'counter-balancing China' has been replaced by the strategy of 'hedging,' which allows space for greater politico-economic cooperation within larger Sino-Indian rivalry. Sidestepping its security concerns, India embarked on connecting its bordering areas with Myanmar to facilitate cross-border trade and greater connectivity. The

completion of Moreh-Tamu-Kalemyo road in 2001 serves an important example of this process. Under the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, India intends to develop road and rail links connecting New Delhi with Hanoi. Another important initiative taken in this direction is India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.

The new positioning of Myanmar in India's geo-strategic calculus has received a major push since 2004. Both economically and geographically, Myanmar has emerged as an important bridge in connecting India's Northeast with Southeast Asia and China's southern province of Yunnan. Since economic integration of the Northeast with Southeast Asia will facilitate greater economic development, India has embarked on various infrastructural development programmes both bilaterally and multilaterally, passing through different parts of Myanmar.

Another important change is in the form of greater thrust on free movement of people and ideas between the Northeast and Southeast Asia, which could further enhance India's strategic presence in Southeast Asia. Several initiatives point towards this trend. Two visits by the ministers from Thailand in 2007 and the hoisting of the Northeast Trade and Investment Opportunities Week in Bangkok in

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October 2007 highlighted the growing willingness of private businesses from Thailand to invest in the region. However, the success of these initiatives is predicated upon the level of connectivity between the Northeast and Southeast Asia via Myanmar. Two important steps have been taken in this direction. First, India and Myanmar have signed the Kaladan multi-modal project, which will facilitate the Northeast's maritime trade with Southeast Asia by giving access to the sea. India has embarked on upgradation and reopening of the 'old Burma road,' which was opened by the

British government during the World War II and which connects Assam in India with Kunming in China via Myanmar.

During the last five years, energy has emerged as an important thrust area of India's Myanmar policy. With the discovery of huge natural gas deposit in 2001, Myanmar has emerged as an important possible supply source for India's energy needs. After losing out the bids for refining and marketing of natural gas off A2 and A3 blocks in the Arakan gas basin, India has further stepped up its diplomacy.

II INDIA & MYANMAR DIFFERENT PRIORITIES, DIFFERENT CONCERNS

The new-found priorities have given birth to different sets of concerns, which require a different framework of relationship with Myanmar. First, the creation of an integrated sub-regional market, involving India's Northeast, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Thailand and the Chinese province of Yunnan, has emerged as an important thrust area of the Look East Policy. The initiatives towards greater economic integration can be implemented effectively only when the transport networks transiting Myanmar remain peaceful and undisrupted.

Majority of India's proposed road and rail networks to connect with Southeast Asia pass through the peripheral areas of Myanmar, controlled by the secessionist ethnic armies, which have been contesting the centralizing nature of military rule and demanding separation or greater autonomy. The 1762-km long Ledo road, which is being projected as a catalyst in the development of the Northeast, covers more than 1000 kms while passing through the Kachin State.

The Kachins have carried an armed struggle against the military junta and largely succeeded in denying the junta of any effective law-enforcement actions in its controlled areas. The control of large stretch of the Stilwell road by the Kachins is an important reason for the military regime's reluctance to reopen the Stilwell road. Similarly, majority of the stretch of the Kaladan multi-modal project pass through the Chin state, which has been demanding secession from Myanmar. Also, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which passes through the Karen

state before entering Mae Sot in Thailand, remains vulnerable to violent disruptions caused by the Karen National Union members. As a result, the Myanmar's writ over these states remains weak and the merchandise traffic remains susceptible to local disruptions. These disturbances can be minimized only when the ethnic groups are represented in the national political framework of Myanmar, thereby, necessitating the setting up of a federal polity in the country.

Second, Myanmar has emerged as an important source of India's ever-expanding energy needs, especially after the discovery of Shwe gas reserves in the Arakan basin in 2004. After three years of negotiations and constant assurances from the Myanmar's military about supplying natural gas to India, the junta decided to offer the right of refining and supplies to China as a favour for the latter's successful effort to block the UN Security Council Resolution on Myanmar in March 2007. The sudden shift in the junta's approach highlighted four important aspects of the military regime, which India has to take into serious consideration:

- Regime survival is more important than any of its international commitment.
- The military junta can backtrack on its own assurances.
- The violation of the rules of the game is an easy option for the Generals.
- China is better placed to exert its influence over the military junta and the former exercises greater degree of influence in the policy decisions of the military elite of Myanmar

Faced with such a scenario, can India ensure that it will not draw similar flak in the future while interacting with an unreliable partner? Should India for its vital strategic interests, partner with a country, whose reliability is highly doubtful? Can India rely on the military junta on strategically important issues like energy supplies? What cost does India have to pay to gain the support of Myanmar junta? The primacy of politics and the interests of the military regime over the economics of relations is not a new phenomenon. The junta has resorted to similar practices in the past.

The decision of the military junta to give the refining and marketing rights to the PetroChina

and permission to China of setting up of pipeline across Myanmar reflects overwhelming Chinese influence over the military junta. To quote Gideon Lundholm: this relationship (China-military junta) will prove hard for India to compete with in the long run, especially as long as the decision-making process within the junta follows the familiar route of political considerations at the expense of sound domestic economic policy. The level of relationship between the military regime and China clearly indicates that India has not actually been able to arrest the drift of the military-ruled Myanmar towards China. China, as of today, exercises greater political and economic capital in the country than India does.

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Moreover, in the aftermath of the military's favour to China, the Arakanese claimed that if India needed natural gas from the field, the Indian government should have negotiated directly with them and not with the Generals. This implies that the control of the military regime over national strategic assets is heavily contested by the ethnic groups controlling the peripheries. Though these ethnic groups may not be able to deny the junta of greater control over these natural resources, they can certainly disrupt the supplies and create conditions in which the production, processing and the marketing of natural gas may become untenable in the coming years. Such a scenario has raised several important questions to the Indian policy makers. What is the guarantee that the military junta will be able to exercise enough politico-administrative control in the face of local contestation against regime control over national resources?

The military regime's dismal control over the ethnic armies has also led to uninterrupted supplies of arms and drugs to the insurgent groups operating in India's northeast. As a result, India's strategic gains in the counter-insurgency operations have

been largely offset. Any engagement effort on the part of India has to take into consideration the capacity of the military regime in supporting India's counter-insurgency operations.

III

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH A FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REGIME IN MYANMAR

In the light of shifting geo-strategic priorities, there is a need for reassessment of India's 'engage junta' approach. Given the limited popular mandate of the military regime, their extremely limited control over the peripheral regions, and their exclusive focus on regime survival, the Indian government should develop different set of constituencies within Myanmar, which could effectively address India's strategic interests. It also becomes obvious that a centralized democratic regime with no or extremely restricted peripheral representation may not serve the above-mentioned interests. Therefore, the best option available before India is to promote a federal democratic regime in Myanmar.

A federal democratic regime in Myanmar adds roughly 60 per cent of Myanmar's territory and 40 per cent of its total population to the national political framework, which, so far, has remained excluded from the ongoing political discourses within and outside the country. The peripheral ethnic groups have been demanding federal government in Myanmar since 1950s; their inclusion will make them stakeholders in the development of the country.

A federal democratic Myanmar will be able to enforce better law and order in the areas of India's concern and ensure freer flow of goods and people. A peaceful periphery in Myanmar will enable India's Northeast to develop as a hub for sub-regional economic transactions, drawing in businesses from Thailand and southern Chinese province of Yunnan. The cross-border exchange of goods will further help in developing mutually sustainable and growing economies in the border regions, which, in turn, will benefit both Myanmar and India. The road networks in the peripheral regions have often been barricaded and closed for traffic due to disruptions by insurgent ethnic groups. India's initiatives for greater economic integration of its northeastern states with the

industrializing economies of Southeast Asia can succeed only when these groups become stakeholders in the political decision-making of Myanmar. India needs to make constant effort towards such a scenario.

Similarly, a federal democratic regime in Myanmar will be more responsible to international norms and less wavering in terms of its international commitment, which in turn, will cushion India against any sudden policy shift within Myanmar. Only a regime, which pays attention to popular demands and international concerns, can ensure that the sudden turnaround of December 2006 is not repeated. A representative regime in Myanmar is better placed also to crack down on supplies of drugs and arms, which India requires badly to address its own insurgency problem in the Northeast

IV

CONCLUSIONS

India's 'engage junta' policy may not prove to be viable in the long run as the junta constantly reneges on its domestic responsibilities, transforming Myanmar into a zone of disaster. The junta will resort to more and more denial of its own responsibilities, creating a situation of instability and insecurity. The peripheries of Myanmar will be more and more violent and assertive, which will further jeopardize India's effort towards greater economic integration and physical connectivity with East and Southeast Asia. Such a scenario does not augur well for India's northeast, which has got a fresh lease of hope for its economic development. In case of Bangladesh's denial of transit facilities, Myanmar is the only hope. India can not afford to let go of this situation and compromise its vital strategic and economic interests in the name of engaging a rogue and pariah regime.

For another perspective on this issue, please see Julien Levesque, "A Reformed Military Junta in Myanmar," Issue Brief 69



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