



## India's Myanmar Policy An Alternative Roadmap

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Saffron was the color of the month as thousands of civilians and monks clad in orange robes dramatically protested in Rangoon last August. Amidst the ensuing civil disturbance, the Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee commented, rather anti-climatically, that, "As a close and friendly neighbor, India hopes to see a peaceful, stable and prosperous Myanmar... Myanmar's process of national reconciliation initiated by the authorities should be expedited."

The above quote exemplifies India's policy of "pragmatic engagement" which, for strategic reasons, entails engaging, rather than condemning and isolating the Burmese junta. However, those who agree with this position fail to realize that India's cooperation with Burma has yet to yield tangible benefits for New Delhi and may even be hurting India's long term goals. What should be India's interest in Myanmar? To maintain the status quo, or to reform the Burmese government gradually?

### I INDIA'S MYANMAR POLICY: A PROFILE

Initially, India strongly supported the pro-democracy movement in Burma and Aung San Suu Kyi. In the mid-1990s, it changed course and began to provide weapons and tacit support to the Burmese junta. India's about-face regarding its policy toward Burma was driven by four motivations: access to natural resources, desire to expand Indian influence in Southeast Asia, combat insurgencies in north east India, and balance against growing Chinese influence.

India's attempt to access Burma's natural resources and counter China's influence have been unsuccessful thus far and are unlikely to

succeed due to Burma's security considerations. Access to Burma's oil and gas reserves is probably the most important consideration in Indo-Burma relations.

Yet despite the fact that India has ignored pressure from Western powers to speak out and take action against Myanmar, the A-1 and A-3 blocks of gas off the coast of Burma were awarded to China. The concession went to China, because in January 2007, China exercised the almighty scepter of international relations, its Security Council veto, against a joint United States and United Kingdom resolution to condemn the Burmese government's human rights violations, urge them to release Suu Kyi, and encourage the junta to begin the process of democratic transition.

Although Rangoon's leaders are known to be suspicious of Chinese influence over their country, they are also primarily concerned with regime survival and India does not have the international political influence that China has to stifle claims for regime change. Therefore, India will never be able to provide Burma with the security guarantees that China can, so long as the junta is in power. As a result, it is unlikely that in a competition over resources or political influence between India and China, Burma would choose India. In such a situation, India's interest is in seeing a more politically open and less repressive Burma which has fewer reasons to rely on China politically.

Another reason why India believed it was worthwhile to bolster its relations with Burma is because New Delhi wants to expand its political, economic, and cultural relationship with Southeast Asia. Building physical links between India and the region will assist the transportation of goods, services, and people, which in turn, will strengthen

India's presence in the region. One step toward this goal was the 2001 opening of the Moreh-Tamu-Kalemyo road, which connects India and Burma.

India has also initiated and agreed to finance the entire Kaladan multi-modal project which aims to develop the Sittwe port in Myanmar's south-west as well as waterways and highways along the Kaladan River to receive goods from India. In the future, India plans to continue expanding its road and rail links with Southeast Asia through Burma.

However, the problem is that many of the transportation links that India proposes run through areas controlled by ethnic groups and militants that demand autonomy or a separate state. Consequently, these groups can disrupt any peaceful India-Burma transportation and India's desire to use Burma as a conduit for Southeast Asia will not be secure as long as the military junta refuses to accommodate the various ethnic groups within its national framework. If India does seek to use Burma as a passageway for its expanded presence in south-east Asia, it has a stake in ensuring that Burma is less repressive of its ethnic communities and more open to political compromise.

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at least twelve groups are believed to have bases in Myanmar. India has already provided Burma with military equipment but Burma has also requested helicopters, submarines, and surveillance aircraft. The arms vending has not been entirely successful because despite joint India-Myanmar cooperation in 1995 to evict insurgency groups from Myanmar, the majority of insurgents still live freely within Myanmar's borders. Furthermore, other activists claim that they have witnessed Indian rebels using

Burmese weapons. Such weapons are usually strictly regulated by the Burmese military, indicating some collusion between the two groups. Moreover, the Burmese junta has an incentive to continue the north-eastern guerilla campaigns in order to guarantee that India will supply weapons that it can use both to minimally fight guerilla groups and oppress its own people. In this situation the Indian government's interest is not in supporting the Burmese dictatorship but in political reform that would allow a government to come to power that had little reason to support an internal conflict in India.

Thus, India's current policy toward Burma does not withstand careful analysis. India has only made minimal, if any, progress at achieving its goals.

## II

### MYANMAR: INDIA'S LONG TERM GOALS

India's support for the Burmese military undermines the country's long term foreign policy goals. In a speech given in October 2007, Indian Foreign Secretary Shri Shivshankar Menon outlined India's foremost foreign policy goals. According to the Foreign Secretary, these goals were to help India secure an external environment conducive to internal economic development. They are, "Firstly, ensuring a peaceful periphery; secondly, improving relations with the major powers; and, thirdly, issues of the future namely food security, water, energy and environment." On all three of these issues, however, India's current position toward Burma goes against its stated objectives.

When Menon emphasized the importance of creating a neighborhood of peace and prosperity, evaluated the various paths to political stability taken by India's neighbors, and discussed India's role in these processes, he conveniently ignored Burma. It is the only country that shares a border with India that goes without mention. This is because Indo-Burmese relations are obviously a direct challenge to the Indian government's goal of building a peaceful and prosperous South Asia. Under the current military junta, Burma is neither peaceful nor prosperous. Rather, relations between the junta and the population are tense because the people are suffering. Nearly one third of children under five are malnourished and malaria and tuberculosis are rampant.

In such a climate, India should fear the same problem that China fears from Burma: an influx of

refugees. Already many Burmese workers seeking work cross into North East India and there are officially 70,000 Burmese refugees in India. Authorities speculate that unofficially the number is twice as many. If the situation in Burma worsens politically or economically, refugees from Burma could seek shelter in India where they share cultural ties with Indians in the North East. Since the North East is also not a peaceful and prosperous region, an influx of refugees, bringing with them disease and other problems, could threaten the tenuous cease-fire that has recently been reached in the region with many insurgent groups. Creating additional problems in the seven sister states is obviously against India's efforts to develop internally. Hence, India should not risk this possibility and should work with the Burmese government to ease the humanitarian situation in Burma.

The second of India's preeminent foreign policy concerns is strengthening India's relationship with the major powers. India's refusal to budge from its Burma position has not earned it any friends in the west. Instead, working to bring about a change in Burma, will win India respect from the major powers. Portraying itself as a responsible and benign power could even bolster India's argument for a permanent Security Council seat.

Furthermore, if India desires to see itself as a major global actor and not just a second rate nation that is unsuccessfully trying to catch up with China, India should take strong offensive measures to shape the world according to its interests. Changing Indian policy toward Burma and leading the reform process would heighten India's international prestige exponentially. Any success that India can achieve in Burma will demonstrate the nation's political prowess and thus will only ease India's acceptance into the elite power club.

Another aspect of this larger goal is improving India-China relations. Currently, India is pursuing a policy of engaging China rather than directly competing with it. In Burma, however, India is directly competing with China both over resources and political influence. India has the opportunity to alter this relationship by recognizing that China and other major Asian nations such as Thailand and Japan have an interest in preventing a human crisis in Burma and making this the basis of dialogue between these nations.

The last goal that Menon mentioned was securing India's access to natural resources. As mentioned earlier, as long as the junta invokes the West's disapproval, it will rely on China to wield its political power to protect it from Western military action, additional UN sanctions, or UN resolutions. In return, China will demand access to Burma's resources, assuring that India will lose the battle for resources and influence.

Similar is the situation with Chinese construction of naval bases in Burma as part of the Chinese plan to establish a naval presence throughout the Indian Ocean. As long as the Burmese feel that they need the Chinese, they will continue to favor China over India.

Menon also mentioned food insecurity as a problem facing India. At the time of Independence, Burma was one of the world's leading rice producers. Since then poor policies have led to a sharp fall in rice production. Supporting the generals and their pitiful economic management has hurt, not helped, India's food needs.

### III THE ROAD AHEAD FOR INDIA

In order to achieve its economic and political goals, India should work to change the status quo of the Burmese government and persuade them that it is in their best interest to slowly, gradually, initiate the process toward economic improvement and democratic transition and avoid a human crisis. As of yet, most of the economic activity in Burma is strictly controlled by the generals to their benefit. Perhaps a starting point for reform would be encouraging the military to reform their economic policies to give average citizens access to economic opportunity or improve the nation's agricultural production, both to feed their hungry population and to sell to

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neighboring India.

Another starting point could be persuading the Burmese government to reach an understanding with the multiple ethnic groups that are fighting the military junta. India can argue that problems with these groups must be resolved before the Burmese and Indian governments can discuss transportation and economic linkages.

To incite Burma to cooperate with India on transportation and economic issues, the Indian government should exploit the xenophobia and

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suspicion of China that characterizes Rangoon's leaders. India should stress the extensive control that China has now gained over Burma and reiterate that China favors political and social stability to ensure its economic interests and fears an influx of Burmese refugees and the spread of diseases into neighboring Chinese provinces.

India can counsel Burmese leaders that if China thinks that the junta cannot stabilize the country and prevent a human catastrophe, it will not hesitate to cooperate with Western nations and allow a regime change in Burma. Such an action will only augment China's prestige within the international community and would be in line with Beijing's recent efforts to develop a positive image of itself within the international community.

Cooperating with India on infrastructure projects and gradual economic deregulation and openness will help the regime maintain stability in Burma by improving the standard of living of citizens, temper calls for a regime change from Western nations, and counter China's domineering relationship with the junta.

At the same time, India should also initiate multi-party dialogues with other Asian nations, particularly China, to coordinate pressurizing the Burmese junta toward reform. This action will create a basis of commonality from which India could enhance its cooperation and downplay its competition with China. If the efforts of these

nations are successful in pursuing gradual economic and political reform, the Burmese government will have less of a reason to rely on Beijing. This will give India a chance to access Burma's natural resources and limit the construction of Chinese naval bases in Burma. Additionally, initiating regional cooperation over Burma will demonstrate to the international community that India is a capable and willing regional power that should be consulted for the resolution of regional problems.

Regional cooperation does entail a prisoner's dilemma where the greatest good to the parties involves cooperation but each party has an incentive to ignore the others and preserve its own interests. In an attempt to counter this prospect, India should emphasize that the current situation is not sustainable and it is only a matter of time before Burma threatens the stability in Asia. Change is required and since no one nation can urge Burma to change, regional cooperation is the option that favors the interests of neighboring states. Perhaps India can try pursuing regional cooperation first, and if it fails, move on to using the xenophobia of the Burmese generals against them.

Ideally, after gradually making economic reforms, the Indian government should encourage political reform, bearing in mind that an immediate democratic transition would be unsustainable since there is no group of individuals in Burma, aside from the junta, who are trained adequately in governance

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