

## THE CHINA FACTOR IN INDIA-MYANMAR RELATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

The article is an analysis of India-Myanmar relations, which are marked by both paranoia and bonhomie. Myanmar is strategically important for India, especially in achieving its objective of “Look-East Policy” (LEP). India has to maintain a cordial relationship with Myanmar to extend its influence in Southeast Asia. This article discusses the pragmatic shift of India’s stand on Myanmar where the growing presence of China in Myanmar and India’s quest for energy are the major drivers. Since early 1990s, China has been successful in bringing Myanmar under its influence. In economic terms, China is a major investor in Myanmar and its military relations with Myanmar are a cause of concern for India. This developing scenario has become a kind of security threat to India. India has been responding pragmatically to this development but so far China has got the upper hand over India due to various reasons. This paper analyses India’s changing foreign policy towards Myanmar since early 1990s. It also discusses the growing Chinese presence in Myanmar. Mains focus of the paper is on the China factor on India-Myanmar relations in the post cold war era.

**KEYWORDS:** India, Myanmar, China, Security, Look East Policy, Etc

### INTRODUCTION

India and Myanmar came under the British colonial rule. The Burmese leaders were associated with Indian leaders during the struggle for national independence. After the end of the third Anglo-Burmese War in 1886, the British integrated the entire Burmese territory within the British Indian Empire and ruled the Burma province directly from Calcutta and from Delhi after 1911 when the British shifted the capital of the British India from Calcutta to Delhi. At that time, Burma was the largest and richest province in the British India. Burma was formally separated from the British India in April 1937. India got independence from the British rule in 1947 while Burma got its independence in 1948. The Prime Ministers of these newly independent countries i.e. Jawaharlal Nehru and U Nu were quite close to each other and developed a friendship that led to the development of good Indo-Burmese relations. During 1948-1962, India-Myanmar relations were cordial and friendly. It was a phase of unique importance. As newly independent states, they cooperated bilaterally on various issues but keeping in view of each other’s national interests. U Nu and Pandit Nehru had similar view of the world affairs. Both were pioneers in advocating the Asian solidarity. Both the countries focussed on bringing economic development for their own people as well as for the other third world countries. The role of Indian immigrants in Burma needs special mention in the evaluation of the Indo-Burmese relations as they had been playing significant role in Burma in the economic, political and social life of Burma since the times of the British rule. The factors such as geography, Diaspora, economic development, political tradition, domestic milieu and foreign policy of both the countries play significant role in their relations.<sup>1</sup>

The good and friendship relations between Myanmar and India during 1948-1962 served the interests of both countries. However, the relations took a sharp turn and began to congeal after Ne Win staged military coup on 2 March

1962 which led to the removal of Prime Minister U Nu and abrogation of the 1947 constitution. The military junta then followed an isolationist policy in the world affairs that lasted for almost three decades. Martial law was applied in the whole of Myanmar in the next three decades. The military junta announced and adopted an economic policy known as the “Burmese Way to Socialism” in April 1964. Under this economic policy, political and economic conditions of Myanmar became more and more deteriorated. Political freedom was totally suppressed and economic conditions became a disaster. The deportation of the people of Indian origin who were brought to Burma mainly for administrative and business purposes by the then ruling British authority also caused restraint in the relations. In 1988, a regime change took place in which military junta in the name of State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took control of state power. The SLORC suspended the policy of “Burmese Way to Socialism” and initiated economic reforms and foreign investment in the country. However, before these reforms actually took shape, a democratic movement erupted which became a real threat to the military junta. The democratic movement was brutally suppressed. The results of the 1990 elections were not recognised. Various countries condemned the actions of the military junta. India became the first Asian country to publicly criticise the SLORC. Towards the end of 1980s, India adopted a policy of supporting the democratic forces and complete disengagement with the ruling military junta in Myanmar. The Indian Embassy in Rangoon actively supported the pro-democracy student activists. India allowed a large number of Burmese to enter India for shelter after the military coup in 1988. Consequently, relations between India and Myanmar further deteriorated. While India was supporting the democratic movement in Burma, China started supporting the military junta thereby Burma became very close to China. By the beginning of 1990s, New Delhi initiated a policy of constructive engagement with the military junta. After the adoption of constructive engagement, the India-Myanmar relations started becoming friendly and cordial again. The changing regional and international relations brought convergence in their interests.<sup>2</sup>

## **INDIA’S POLICY OF CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH MYANMAR**

After 1990, India started the policy of “constructive Engagement” towards Myanmar. It is the policy of dealing the leaders of military junta of Myanmar. At that time also, the military junta felt the necessity of opening up the country due to concern over internal problems and the changing relationship with the neighbouring countries.<sup>3</sup> The policy of the “constructive Engagement” was adopted with a view to develop closer ties with Myanmar. The deteriorated relations between India-Myanmar before the adoption of the policy gave China a good opportunity to influence Myanmar and brought it under its control. Since the 1988 democratic uprising in Myanmar, China started engaging Myanmar strongly thereby both the countries became very close to each other. Since then the close relations between China and Myanmar have posed a threat to the security of India. After 1990, India realised the importance of Myanmar in safeguarding its national interests. India changed its foreign policy from an ethics based to *Realpolitik* which credit can be awarded to Prime Ministers P.V. Narashimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee. India needed better relations with Myanmar to counter balance Chinese influence in Myanmar. The Indian policy of supporting the democratic movement while criticising the actions of the military junta at the same time was found to be detrimental to the national interests of India. For a long time, India has been facing the border insurgency and drug trafficking problems along the Indo-Myanmar border. India needed the cooperation of Myanmar to tackle these problems too. Strengthening relations with Myanmar is also required for the peaceful development of the north-eastern regions of India.<sup>4</sup> the policy of “constructive engagement” was thus adopted with a view to rectify the shortcomings in foreign policies and serve the national security of India.

Another factor which led to the initiation of the “constructive engagement” is that India, after 1990, wanted to

integrate its economy to the world economy thus getting share of the benefits of the new wave of globalisation which has been sweeping all parts of the world since the end of the cold war. For this to realise, it was essential for India to open its market and have closer economic cooperation with its neighbours, including Myanmar. In this ongoing process of economic cooperation with the neighbours, Myanmar began to occupy an important position. The ties that were frozen earlier between India and Myanmar began to soften after the adoption of its LEP in 1991. Besides being immediate neighbours linked by geography, India and Myanmar are also related through history and age-old ties of religion, culture and interaction at people's level. Myanmar is situated at a critical geo-strategic position in the Southeast and South Asia regions. It is a meeting point of South Asia, East Asia and South East Asia. Myanmar is the only member of ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Cooperation) which share land and maritime borders with India. In other words, Myanmar is India's gateway to ASEAN. Myanmar occupies, therefore, a central place in India's LEP. Besides this, Myanmar occupies one of the most important land routes for China too. One of the historically important land routes for business and trade in the Southeast Asian Region i.e. the Burma Road also known as 'Silk Route' passes through Myanmar. The availability of such important transportation facilities in Myanmar offers to India an alternative way to connect the East and Southeast Asian markets. India is therefore keen to develop economic relations with Myanmar. In fact, Myanmar have become very important for India since the late 1990s, with India's focus on its LEP later transformed to "Act East Policy" and increasing concern for its Northeast region. The changing geopolitical shifts in South and Southeast Asian regions couple with the ever-increasing wave of globalization after the end of the cold war brought about the necessity to adjust strategically and carry out a new orientation in India's foreign policy. Myanmar has become paramount importance to India in the context of its new orientation and area specific approach to its security as well as economic interests. By early 1990s, both India and Myanmar changed views towards each other. India being a democratic country did not support the military coup and the capture of power by the military dictator Ne Win in 1962. After 1962, Myanmar followed isolationist policy in its relations with other countries. These non-converging policies began to dilute when Myanmar began to change its policy from isolationist to strategic engagement since early 1990s. Myanmar's shift of policy from isolationist to strategic engagement has become matter of concern for India. India could no longer remain attached to its ethics based foreign policies. So India altered its foreign policy towards Myanmar based on pragmatism. The success of India's LEP, various projects like gas pipeline, trans-Asian highway from Patna in India to Kalembo in Myanmar, ties with ASEAN etc, require cooperation with Myanmar. Without Myanmar, these would remain confining to paper.

### CHINA'S STRATEGIC POSITION IN MYANMAR

Myanmar is a bridge connecting South Asia, South East Asia and East Asia. It has two rising powers as neighbours, China to the northeast sharing 2171 kilometres long border while India to the northwest sharing 1643 kilometres long border. Its long coastline with good harbours also makes it an important player in the Bay of Bengal. This strategic location makes it an important neighbour for both the counties. Since the early 1990s, the SLORC began to increase its dependence on China. Consequently, Myanmar has become over dependence on China behaving like a client state of China.<sup>5</sup> In such situation India need to counter balance China in Myanmar. Such influence has become main threat to India. In order to counter balance of China, India needs to promote better relations with Myanmar. Since the early 1990s, the 'third generation' of Chinese leaders have planned to seek greater Chinese power and influence in Asia and consequently a place in the new world order for the People's Republic of China. This led them to implement a realist and pragmatic policy towards its neighbours.<sup>6</sup>

Myanmar's policies towards the neighbouring countries and the region are mainly the outcome of its search for security. The main concerns are the need of the survival of the military regime as well as the security of the state too. Myanmar's efforts can be interpreted to maintain the balance of power in the region and avoid the emergence of any regional hegemony in the region.<sup>7</sup> However; Myanmar occupies an important place in China's grand strategy. Geo-economic and geo strategic interests play crucial role in framing Chinese policies towards Myanmar. Myanmar has, with vast resources and a sizeable population, the potential to play a larger role in the regional security environment. But due to its strategic importance to China and the current nature of relationship with China, Myanmar is unlikely to play its potential role freely and independently from Beijing.<sup>8</sup>

China is ahead of India in influencing Myanmar. In fact, China's ties with Myanmar are much stronger and deeper in all aspects-political, economic, strategic and military as compared to India. China has been providing many opportunities in Myanmar. China provides aid for various projects and also invests a huge amount of money in various infrastructure projects, especially in transportation like the construction of the road from Kunming in southern China region to Mandalay in central Myanmar, exploration of natural gas and oil etc.<sup>9</sup> since 1989, China has been the most important supplier of military aid to Myanmar. China has supplied Myanmar with jet fighters, naval vessels, armoured vehicles and trained army, navy and air force personals. It is estimated that China alone supplied about 90% of the military transportations to Myanmar.<sup>10</sup> the nature of such relations between China-Myanmar is making difficult for India to create good relations with Myanmar. India feels that China's strategic move to Myanmar is a security threat to India. In fact, one of the major factors that led to shift in India's policy towards Myanmar was its security concern. During WW-II, K.M. Pannikar, a historian and a strategist, par excellence explained Myanmar's strategic significance to India thus:

*"The defence of Burma in fact is the defence of 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".<sup>11</sup>*

India perceives China as a threat to its own economic, political and military interests. China has developed much deeper economic, strategic and military partnership with Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Due to such relations, India fears being encircled by China and its allies Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar in the region. India's indifference to Myanmar for many years created a vacuum for China to easily step in and exploit the situation for strategic reasons. Myanmar provides China an easy access to the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea which is a cause of concern for India's security. Myanmar provides China the best shortcut to the Indian Ocean.<sup>12</sup> The 1991 and 1992 Sino-Myanmar agreements were rumoured to have included clauses allowing China to establish signal intelligence (SIGINT) listening facilities on great Coca Island in the Andaman Sea and at several other locations, along Myanmar's cost which would allow the PLA to monitor Indian military activities. Myanmar officials have always denied the existence of such facility. The Bay of Bengal is very important to China from the economic perspective too. China is an energy hungry country and in near future its energy need is going to increase tremendously. Through Myanmar, China will be able to control the Bay of Bengal and this will provide an alternative route to transport its much needed energy to its southern region. China's dominance in Myanmar is therefore a threat to maritime interests of India in the Indian Ocean. Thus, improvement and revival of India-Myanmar relations is extremely needed in order to counter the challenges of "rising China". Economic sanctions and policy of isolation of Myanmar by Western countries have provided good opportunity to China to promote good relations with Myanmar. China supported Myanmar in international for a particularly in human rights issue. China

has always reiterated that the democracy question is Myanmar's internal affair and the outer world should not interfere in it.<sup>13</sup>

China helps Myanmar in financial sector too. The Exim Bank of China provide soft loan to Myanmar. Many business sectors are also under the control under of China. The main business from Myitkyine to Mandalay and Yangon are under the Chinese control. The Chinese immigrants in Myanmar are also increasing day by day. Most of the properties in north Myanmar region are under the control of Chinese. The Chinese get the larger share of the increasing economic benefits arising from the economic relations between them. The local people of Myanmar have felt the threat posed by this new development as they are losing opportunity in their own country. Chinese threat is, therefore, increasing day by day among the local people. The local people of Myanmar are aware of this Chinese threat and as such they have shown some kind of unwillingness to cooperate with Chinese. The military rulers have began to feel the need to reduce dependence on China and to cultivate relationships with other countries to mitigate China's leverage.<sup>14</sup> The suspension of Myitsone dam sponsored by China is one of the examples to escape from Chinese threat and control. This situation has provided India an alternative way to develop better relations with Myanmar to counterbalance China. India needs to take advantages of this situation.

### INDIA'S RESPONSE TO CHINA-MYANMAR RELATIONS

The China and Myanmar are having very good relations. The relationship is mutually advantages to both of them. But China is getting more shares of the benefits of the relations. Elaborating Myanmar's attitude towards its large neighbours, Li Chenyang, observed:

*"Myanmar will maintain friendly relations with China and India but will not allow either of them to have a dominant influence. Myanmar is a country with strong nationalist sentiments. Its top leaders do not trust China and have little confidence in India. Like other southeast countries adopting a balance of power strategy, Myanmar will adhere to its traditional neutral position and continue to balance its relations with China, India, ASEAN and the western democracies".<sup>15</sup>*

As such there are problems in China-Myanmar relationship too. The problems face by the relationship can be summarised as below:

- The suspension of Myitsone dam has hard hit the bilateral relations.
- Myanmar's relations with the US are going to have impact on China-Myanmar relations.
- Hostility to China at all levels of society.
- Many anti-China nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) were active in Myanmar.
- At a personal level, the people may not like the Chinese but there is no escaping them.
- Border issue and energy issue.
- Kachin State issue etc.

India's emerging strategic interests in Burma can be discussed in three categories: firstly, coordinating effective counter insurgency measures to drive out the Northeast insurgents hiding inside Burma; secondly, improving bilateral

relations with Myanmar and thirdly, countering China's growing influence in Myanmar. However, India has achieved few successes in third case but face a lot of limitations in the first two cases. The inability and unwillingness of the Burmese military officials to act against the Northeast insurgents is the main cause of continue presence of these insurgents inside Burma. Burma also utilises these insurgents as a bargaining chip in its dialogue with India. The underachievement of economic relations is mainly due to the lack of political and financial will of India. The transport infrastructure along the India-Burma border areas is very weak which make China a favourite destination for Burmese businessmen due to the well developed infrastructure in the China-Burma border regions. Political and economic instability in Burma also hinder investments from India. The control of economic activities by the state also hinders development of Indo-Burma economic activities. In regard to counter the Chinese influence in Burma, India has achieved something. The frequent visits by the Indians officials resulted in not allowing the establishment of Chinese military bases in Burma. Burma is also in search of new partners to reduce overdependence on China. Today, India has started supplying military equipments to Burma. For Burma, developing strong naval relations with India is essential as the Indian Navy control the Bay of Bengal as well as the willingness of the Indian Navy to train their Burmese counterparts.<sup>16</sup>

India needs to take up various activities in Myanmar in order to successfully counter balance China. The following steps need to be taken up for improving India-Myanmar Relations.

- Development of Tourism.
- Medical tourism.
- Need to establish Department of International Relations, Department of Southeast Asian studies and Department of East Asian studies and languages at Manipur University.
- Need to establish Think-Tank related activities with focus on Southeast Asia or Chinese foreign policy at Manipur University.
- Development of infrastructure.
- Development of road and connectivity projects.
- Development of border regions.
- MU need to collaborate with Myanmar and Thailand universities and organise exchanges programmes.
- Promote skill development industry.
- Manipur Government need political will.
- To promote co-operation of ASEAN countries to balance China.
- To counter Chinese economic influence in the Southeast Asia region.
- The English language proficiency of India can facilitate the pace of co-operation with Myanmar over China.
- India needs to reorient the grand design of developing the NER like China's western development strategy of transforming Yunnan region into a World class destination.
- Promote people to people contact and Business to Business contact etc.

## CONCLUSIONS

Developing good relations with Myanmar is very important to India for the success of its LEP. There is ongoing competition between India and China to influence in Myanmar. Improving good relations with Myanmar is very much needed for India in order to counter balance China. The security threat pose by China will be minimised to certain extent if India can develop good relations with Myanmar. India needs to promote good co-operation at various levels with Myanmar. India needs to provide and fund more projects and opportunities in Myanmar more than China. Besides government to government relations, people to people contact needs to be emphasised to develop strong ground level relations. This will help a lot in minimising the likely fear to be felt by the local people.

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