

RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIA, CHINA AND THE MYANMAR

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ABSTRACT

The year 2015 proves to be an important transition year for Myanmar as the National League for Democracy (NLD) swept the election with clear mandate ousting 50 years of Military rule. Nevertheless, victorious NLD faces a challenging task in translating its promises to actions as the constitution of Myanmar drafted by the military junta (or Tatmadaw) still upholds military supremacy and controls important subjects of governance thereby relinquishing its dominance. Besides the complex internal situation, there is also a deliberation over Myanmar's relations to the outside world especially with its neighbors India and China. As NLD takes its seat in Myanmar there is a general perception over its approaches towards India and China who have long been Myanmar's engaging partners. As NLD foundation lay embedded in democratic features India feels it has its card to play since India display one of the largest democratic nation. On the other hand, China feels that despite a brief hostility and anti- Chinese sentiment it can still play an active role in Myanmar as it understands Myanmar better than other nations. Within the two considerations, Myanmar as a self-independent nation should give equal priority to all nations including India and China. Its foreign policy should be dictated by the rational approach with a view to open and accessible to the outside world.

KEYWORDS: Myanmar, National League for Democracy, Tatmadaw, India, China

INTRODUCTION

India-Myanmar relations are rooted in shared historical, ethnic, cultural and religious ties. As the **land of Lord Buddha**, India is a country of pilgrimage for the people of Myanmar. The geographical proximity of the two countries has helped develop and sustain cordial relations and facilitated people-to-people contact. Myanmar has a **1, 643 land border with India** and is emerging as the **gateway for India to other Southeast Asian countries**. A large population of Indian origin (about 2.5 million) lives in Myanmar. India and Myanmar's relationship officially got underway after **the Treaty of Friendship** which was signed in **1951**, after which the foundation for a more meaningful relationship was established during **Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's** visit in 1987. Bilateral ties received another significant boost when the two countries signed a trade agreement in 1994. For many years India did not open up to the authoritarian regime, and it was only over a period of time that India started engaging with the military junta of Myanmar.

As said by the then Prime Minister Sh Jawaharlal Nehru in 1948 on the Burma's independence day from Britain, "As in the past, so in the future, the people of India will stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Burma, and whether we have to share good fortune or ill fortune, we shall share it together." And till date, people of India are fulfilling their former PM's promise with the country. Though the relationship between the two countries has seen ups & downs in past years. India's rise on the international stage and Myanmar's "democratic transition" are forcing both

governments to reassess the nature of bilateral relations based on regional geopolitical developments.

For many years, Indo-Burmese relations were strong due to Myanmar previously having been a province of India, due to cultural links, flourishing commerce, common interests in regional affairs and the presence of a significant Indian community in Myanmar. India provided considerable support when Myanmar struggled with regional insurgencies. Along with much of the world, India condemned the suppression of democracy and Myanmar ordered the expulsion of the Burmese Indian community, increasing its own isolation from the world it was only China who maintained close relations with Myanmar.

The 2015 election proved to be a watershed moment in the history of Myanmar. It was a litmus test for Myanmar as it was the country's first national election since its last free election in 1960 though the 1990 election did take place constitutional power was never transferred to the National League for Democracy (NLD) by military Junta. As of 2015 Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won a landslide victory defeating military-backed Thein Sein's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) thus ending 50 years of military rule in the Myanmar¹. The victory was a historic moment for 54 million people of Myanmar who have been living under the tight control rule of military Junta. However the constitution of Myanmar drafted by military Junta in 2008 brings a challenging setback to NLD in translating its promises to actions. First, Article 6(F) guarantees military a 25 per cent reservation in the parliament. Military representative holds key subjects of governance that includes home, defence, and border affairs. Second, Article 59(f) of the constitution of Myanmar states one of the qualifications to become the head of the state. It prohibits any person with legitimate children and spouse having allegiance to a foreign power or foreign qualification from the post. Accordingly it debars Aung San Suu Kyi from the post of presidency since she is married to a foreigner (her husband, Michael Aris was a British national and a historian) and her children are thereby a British nationals. Third, Article 436 which sets that for any amendment to the constitution, an approval of more than seventy-five percent votes are required to pass legislation. In addition the dominance of military personnel in the National Defence and Security Council which is the highest executive body in the government further alleviate the position of military dominance as they are vested with the power to declare emergency at any time. Hence as seen from the constitutional clauses it looks very noteworthy that military is not likely to relinquish its dominance any time soon.

Therefore in the post-election of Myanmar, a major complex challenge that NLD faces is the question over how much power will they be able to exercise, especially with the military holding seats in the parliament (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw) as well as key posts. The new government and Su Kyi in person has an utmost task to balance equally well with the military personnel in carrying out its promises keeping in view the essence of coming to power and also of the constitutional clauses that military holds the advantage. Therefore after NLD came to power speculation arose about how she would proceed since Myanmar constitution prohibits her from the post of presidency. Moreover, it appeared likely that she might go for clear boldness this time, taking it as an opportunity to challenge the military leaders. But Suu Kyi carefully decided not quarrel directly with the military leaders. Instead, she herself named to three different cabinet posts (foreign minister, minister to the presidency and as a proxy president). Besides she also made an extra step and had her party create the new state counselor job for her. It was a new post and created especially to allow Suu Kyi for a greater role in decision making within the government thereby respecting the constitution clauses and while also subverting it.

Apart from the transformation of the military to the civilian democratic government with complex internal hiccup, there was also a question of how Myanmar extends its relations with the outside world, particularly with its neighbors India and China who shares a closer relationship with Myanmar. Myanmar transition to democracy under the new government and new leaders brought the question of its survival in the globalized world which is constantly witnessing liberal flow of products, people, and ideas. Over the past decades, Myanmar was reeling under western economic sanction because of military's poor human rights records and crime. The sanctions brought Myanmar on the brink of collapse, completely isolated with crumbling economic in all sectors. It made military personnel's to involve in corruption, looting, charging fraudulent taxes and hefty fines on locals without emphasizing on human development which was in dire need. Under this pretext, Myanmar ranked 148 in the human development list and it is still declining. All this happened under the long decade of military rule which fails to create a legitimate space for the people of Myanmar to improve. As NLD won landslide victory ending decades of military rule, the first and the utmost importance to the new government lie in restructuring Myanmar in the global configuration. It needed to improve its human development track giving people more space to express its rights and concern. It needs to open up its policy to the outside world so that more investment and development pour in thereby putting Myanmar in the global map. In this regard, its neighbors can play an important role in bringing Myanmar from the pariah state. Its strategic location at the crossroad of India, China, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Thailand gives Myanmar an edge to lure the development services of these countries. Therefore in the entire development prospect and the significance of new government there a lie question of how far Myanmar connects and interacts with its neighbors i.e. India and China to come out of the shell.

India

As far as India is a concern it has a long history of enduring affinity with Myanmar created by geographical contiguity, historical affinity (Myanmar was a province of British India from 1885 to 1937), cultural interaction and a shared political experiences. India has politically supported Myanmar's earlier democratic step led by Aung San (father of Aung Sang Suu Kyi) erstwhile Military Junta. But at the later stage of 1960's Myanmar fell prey to military coup and India was perennially caught in the dilemma between its own democratic conscience and regional configuration especially Myanmar falling prey to China's sphere of influence. This dilemma shed India to change its stand towards Myanmar and began to engage constructively with Junta thereby balancing the strategic incursion of Chinese influence. The constructive engagement began with the realization that India's new policy 'Look East' will remain as a dream without having a functioning relationship with Myanmar since Myanmar is the only physical gateway that connects India and Association of South East Asian (ASEAN) countries. Therefore Myanmar became a critical part of India foreign policy for two important reasons. First, the geo-strategic location of Myanmar at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia² provides a physical gateway to the landlocked region of India's Northeast and most importantly in India's objective of Look East-Act East policy to integrate with Southeast Asian countries. Second, the increasing security risk of being enclosed by China's encirclement policy as China in its own sphere of influence is seen cultivating commercial, economic and strategic ties with most of India's close neighbors i.e. Myanmar, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh.

And over the past decade, India has started to make its presence felt in Myanmar. Under various governments in past India had focused in supporting Myanmar with institution and capacity building development projects, providing language courses, vocational training in IT and agriculture sectors³. Besides this development assistance which seeks to

strengthen its Look East- Act East Policy, an initiative is also made to enhance connectivity routes such as the Trilateral Highway and upgrading of Kalewa-Yargyi stretch of the Trilateral Highway⁴ which is aimed to connect landlocked Northeast India. Once it is completed it will significantly lessen the distance between the two nations and open up the region that has been isolated for years. Elsewhere the discovery of vast oil and natural gas reserves in offshore Myanmar basin and other resources such as Jade, coal, timber and hydroelectricity also made India a natural partner.

As new BJP Government came to power with clear mandate victory in the 2014 elections there were more extensive efforts to bring Myanmar into the loci of Indian foreign policy engagement. The Indian Prime Minister was leaving no stone unturned in extending its relations towards its neighbors. He asserts that India's neighbors Myanmar, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka hold an important place and have a significant part to play in India's foreign policy re-orientation. In its comprehensive engagement with Myanmar, the present, Indian Prime Minister rechristened the old 'Look East' policy to 'Act East' policy thereby expanding the importance of striking engagement with ASEAN countries and further wider to Asia-Pacific countries which till now could not achieve its full potential. As such India basic objective with Act East looks positive with the victory of NLD. Given Aung San Suu Kyi's close connection with India (she graduated from the University of Delhi in 1964), Myanmar political ties with India could reinforce in the area of economic cooperation and connectivity. But India has to be very careful and very constructive at every step this time to make engagement with Myanmar a better and a fruitful one. India should take into consideration that the card now lies in India's favor. What it requires is a positive, well-structured policy towards Myanmar which is lacking till date. Moreover, as NLD embark on its new journey to democracy path there is a chance that Myanmar could model itself on India, which enjoys a stable democracy.

China

Burma was the first non-Communist country to recognize the Communist-led People's Republic of China after its foundation in 1949. Burma and the People's Republic of China formally established diplomatic relations on June 8, 1950. China and Burma signed a treaty of friendship and mutual non-aggression and promulgated a Joint Declaration on June 29, 1954, officially basing their relations on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. However, Burma maintained a neutralist foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s. Relations began to improve significantly in the 1970s. Under the rule of Deng Xiaoping, China reduced support for the Communist Party of Burma ("CPB") and on August 5, 1988, China signed a major trade agreement, legalizing cross-border trading and began supplying considerably military aid. Following the violent repression of pro-democracy protests in 1988, the newly formed State Peace and Development Council, facing growing international condemnation and pressure, sought to cultivate a strong relationship with China to bolster itself; in turn, China's influence grew rapidly after the international community abandoned Burma.

However, after the 2011 reform, Myanmar has started to shift away from China, leaving China big concerns over the decreasing influence of China in Myanmar. And following with the Chinese rebels and Tatmadaw conflict in the Northern part of Myanmar, China has to vow to keep Myanmar and China remain close tie until the solution is found.

On the other hand, China relations with Myanmar is characterized by complex and multifaceted dynamics. Historically China's relation with Burma dates back to early years of Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasty where the Burmese rulers used to pay tribute as part of self-determination and respect. After Burma's independence from the colonial British rule in 1948, it was amongst the first non-communist nation to recognize the legitimate rule of People's Republic of China

(PRC) in mainland China. Progressively thereafter both nations established its diplomatic relations. Barring few snags and gluey situations like anti-Chinese riots in 1967 and the expulsion of Chinese communities from Burma, relations grew on a positive note. Furthermore, economic ties with Myanmar also grew rapidly after 1988, when western sanctions on Myanmar were put in place. The military regime of Myanmar wanted to liberalize its foreign trade and investment so as to revive the ailing economy that was reeling under international economic sanctions. This enabled it to extend and build a strong relationship with China. At the outset, China's engagement with Myanmar lies at the strategic location of Myanmar at the cusp of South and South-East Asia which offers a trading outlet to its landlocked provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan into the Indian Ocean⁵. Likewise, it will also provide an impetus to Beijing grand strategy of countering India's influence and U.S. encirclement in the region.

Therefore with the advent of military rule and several other factors, both external and internal encouraged closer ties between China and Myanmar. With the discovery of oil and natural gas, Myanmar was further enhanced into the global market bringing China furthermore into its stronghold position by outbidding all other players, building necessary infrastructure at low cost, providing low-interest and technical assistance, political support and economic assistance for the Junta when Myanmar was spooling under economic stagnation. Consequently, China became Myanmar's biggest trade partner, biggest import and export market investor with trade business between the two nations amounting as high as \$10 billion⁶. This increasing influence and huge absorption capacity, its development package and economic assistance gradually pushed Myanmar into the realm of knowing as a "de facto" Chinese client state⁷. But Myanmar's political transition under Thein Sein's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) in 2011 brought a serious complication in the previously pleasant relations between two governments. Within its coming to power, the government released many political prisoners, de-regularised censor media, released Suu Kyi from house arrest and reinstated NLD as a major opposition party. Elsewhere Thein Sein also suspended the \$3.6bn Myitsone dam amidst growing tension thereby showing greater openness to public opinion. This step was largely refuted by the Chinese officials who have invested heavily on the dam construction. The suspension of Letpadung copper mine further infuriated China as they began to feel hostility coming from all levels of society in Myanmar.

In the wake of the National League for Democracy's (NLD) landmark victory after ousting the longstanding military rule, Beijing hopes to start fresh in Myanmar. Beijing is associating itself with Suu Kyi and her government to help navigate the anti-China sentiment on the ground and sell a stronger relationship with China as a good thing. The recent visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Myanmar illustrates China collective effort to stay as an ally and seek a new chapter of cooperation with Myanmar⁸. China has a high hope that NLD might give them a greater economic role to play given China's well known of being the biggest trading and investment partner of Myanmar for many years. But the hope of seeking a new chapter and bridging the gap of bitterness is not going to be an easy one. Myanmar foreign policy reform initiated in 2011 under Thein Sein government has seen a key trend of opening up its relation to the west thereby reducing its dependence on China. Besides India at its very next door, Beijing feels Myanmar might incline and reform its foreign policy keeping India at the center of its orientation. India exemplifies as the world largest democracy and as Myanmar has taken its first step towards a democratic system there is a chance that they might move closer to India. This brings a fear in the mind of Beijing diplomats as it will give India a major advantage in reorienting its foreign policy towards Myanmar and further Southeast Asia which till now have been dominated by China.

India has the upper hand compared to China in catering to Myanmar's needs for better education, training, and skill development. This is witnessed in the close collaboration between the Indian Institute of Information Technology (IIIT) in Bangalore and the Myanmar Institute of Technology. Also, private players such as the TATA Consultancy Service (TCS) have undertaken projects in Myanmar as well. India has provided loans to develop and upgrade infrastructure projects such as the Yangon-Mandalay rail link, and in the recent past, as part of the AEP, Modi has begun negotiations in upgrading road links between the two nation states.

Myanmar's policy of hedging is complimented by India's AEP. This is witnessed in India's move toward signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Myanmar for improving the "socioeconomic condition" of the people belonging to Myanmar's Rakhine state. The MoU seeks to help the displaced Rohingya community within Rakhine and contribute to their resettlement and social welfare. Furthermore, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Myanmar in 2017 led to significant discussions on expanding India's role in undertaking infrastructural and socioeconomic projects

CONCLUSIONS

But keeping the consideration at bay it looks clear enough that China appears to understand Myanmar better and has a greater clarity in its objective. This is especially true when it comes to Chinese products being more suitable for them as compared with Indian products. Moreover, China still has an important role to play in Myanmar's foreign policy objective. First, with the new government and new leaders followed by economic stagnation, low human rights record, Myanmar therefore, needs economic growth to pull over from further worsening. In this situation China is best positioned to bring Myanmar out of this deteriorating condition like they have been doing, second Myanmar feels more secured under the umbrella of China's permanent seat in the UN rather than India's democratic values, principles and humane approach. As such in the changing Myanmar, China's future looks positive and the survival and recognition of its stay depend on the pragmatic role it plays in Myanmar respecting the democratic conscience. On the other hand, India's future in Myanmar lies in its assertive role to enhance its relations with NLD via democratic institution building. As a democratic nation with reasonable diversity and a healthy growth rate, India ought to feel that it has more to offer. It just needs to be more practical while dealing with Myanmar this time, not constrained only to economics, neither by the China thing.

As far as Myanmar itself is a concern being a young, independent, democratic nation, its will be better in its interest not to prioritize exclusively either to India or China. Rather it should extend its friendship and cooperation with all nations including India and China. Myanmar should remember that in the globalized world of interaction it should recourse its foreign policy by implementing new policies and strategies so as to increase its bilateral ties keeping in mind the aspect and importance of each country in its nation-building prospects. And last but not the least foreign Minister Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has the utmost role to play in restructuring Myanmar new foreign policy keeping in mind the aspirations of her people and the complex constitutional clauses which can alter or falter any amendments or policies of the new government.

Myanmar's government understands the value it provides to both India and China. India's security dilemmas and its interest in new sources of oil and natural gas will continue to drive its ambitions vis-à-vis Myanmar for the foreseeable future. At the same time, China's access to the Bay of Bengal via Myanmar, and the security of energy accessibility via its landlocked southern provinces make Myanmar an important strategic partner for Beijing. Within this context, deepening ties between India and Myanmar will remain an issue for China.

Regardless of Myanmar's democratic transition status, its geostrategic significance and natural resources will be in power Chinese and Indian interests intersect. A probability of Chinese and Indian existence in Myanmar are high, but China will have a distinct advantage because of its history, its military assistance, and its alignment of long-term interests.

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