

Understanding Myanmar in the Regional Geo-Politics of Asia

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Abstract:

Strategic significance of Myanmar in the recent times must be viewed from the lens of geo-politics, geo-economics and strategic calculus. Although India enjoys competitive advantages until now and before Myanmar's reconciliation and bridge-building with the United States and other regional powers such as highly competitive Japan, South Korea and China — nevertheless, there remain certain critical areas of concern. Given this context, this Paper argues for understanding the dynamics of each of these geo-strategic players in the internal political development of Myanmar and its transition to democracy.

Key words: Myanmar, United States, Japan, South Korea, China, India, ethnic reconciliation

I. INTRODUCTION

Analysing Myanmar's politics as a student of international relations makes us rise above the romanticized narrative of India-Myanmar relations from the rhetoric of "Mere piya gaye Rangoon" to the real-politik of the twenty first century. Given the strategic significance of Myanmar in the recent times, it must be viewed from the lens of geo-politics, geo-economics and strategic calculus. Although India enjoys competitive advantages until now and before Myanmar's reconciliation and bridge-building with the United States and other regional powers such as highly competitive Japan, South Korea and its big brother, China — nevertheless, there remain certain critical areas of concern. Under this backdrop, this Paper studies the dynamics of each of these geo-strategic players in the internal political development of Myanmar and its transition to democracy. It also highlights on the Indian connection and its multifaceted engagement in Myanmar in recent times.

CHINA FACTOR:

As India and China have emerged as major powers in Asia, their interests and concerns have transcended their geographical boundaries. It has long been argued that Myanmar as a strategic variable has always governed the dynamics of India-China relations. Strikingly enough, locating their standpoints in Myanmar indicate a clear convergence of interests. One distinct factor which appears here is the fact that Myanmar shares common borders with them, a 2,185-kilometre border with China and a 1,643-kilometre border with India. Its geostrategic location to the Southwest of China and Northeast of India on the one hand while overlooking the Bay of Bengal to its south as a transit point to the busiest waterways of the world has been a high-priority asset for both India and China. In the words of U Thant Myint, "Myanmar is a 'missing link' between the two massive neighbours of Asia having a combined population of over 2.5 billion. It lies at the 'crossroads' of the world's biggest democracy and world's biggest communist state"¹. Its strategic location is considered as an important asset for both India and China. Therefore, without a doubt, the recent developments in Myanmar are a matter of utmost concern for both India and China.

In the years following democratic transition and change, Myanmar's reconciliation and bridge-building with the West adequately challenged China's interest by disrupting the balance of power in the region. It opened a new platform for other countries to make overtures towards Myanmar widely considered as one of the most under-explored markets in Asia. Encouraged by relaxation of sanctions and establishment of the quasi-civilian regime after November 2010 elections, there have been large-scale investments from different quarters. In the aftermath of the end of longstanding isolation, Myanmar's new-founded bonhomie with the West is a source of phenomenal advantages.

China has overtaken other countries in terms of pumping in money and finalising massive infrastructural projects. It has left no stone unturned in wooing its southern neighbour. India must make larger investments in Myanmar not only to check Beijing's rising regional dominance but also not to lose an immediate neighbour which has a buffer status vis-à-vis China. Significantly, the Beijing-led "Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is considering providing \$20 million to Myanmar for the development, construction and operation of a Greenfield 225 MW Combined Cycle Gas Turbine (CCGT) power plant in Mandalay. It will be the largest gas-

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fired Independent Power Producer (IPP) in Myanmar, producing much-needed clean energy to meet the power deficit.²⁷ Furthermore it has been reported that “A master plan for a Chinese-backed, model economic zone along the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) has been prepared and Myanmar is engaged in discussions for its implementation. The Myitkyina Economic Development Zone (MEDZ) is also in the pipeline and a pact was signed between Myanmar and the Chinese Yunnan Tengchong Heng Yong Investment Company for its implementation. The MEDZ expected to cost over \$400 million, will include nearly 500 factories and 5,000 buildings”³.

UNITED STATES-MYANMAR BONHOMIE:

Myanmar has undergone a near-complete realignment of relationship with the United States and Western Europe as the sanctions were eased when the quasi-civilian regime assumed charge in 2011. The United States has been supportive of the reform process in Myanmar with the USAID being a keen facilitator for embarking on developmental cooperation with the country.

In terms of strategy especially in the larger Asia-Pacific, it is considered that Myanmar’s stability in the region would add strength and legitimacy to the rebalancing approach of the United States. Its policy towards Myanmar is part of a larger policy in the region to support a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific.’ Given China’s own multi-dimensional and complex relations with the US in the wake of recent trade wars, this could certainly impinge on the former’s relations with newly reforming and changing Myanmar. As per the reports, Myanmar seeks to gain from the ongoing trade war between the US and China because of the rising interest of the Chinese manufacturing and processing units to be set up in Myanmar.

It was China which had somewhat stood by Myanmar in the wake of economic sanctions by the West in the late 1980s. But the relaxation in sanctions has seemingly undercut the preponderant influence of China in the country. As Obama’s ‘pivot’ to Asia including frequent dialogues with United States leadership as well as high-level official visits became more common, they triggered new strategic anxieties for China prompting a nuanced assessment of Myanmar by China. However, the absence of any concrete US policy towards Myanmar during President Trump’s administration and his added support to Bangladesh for pressurizing Myanmar for ‘safe and voluntary’ return of Rohingya refugees has further brought it closer to China’s closet. China seems to be shielding it against the United Nations Human Rights investigation report for punitive action for committing genocide on Rohingya Muslims over the years in Myanmar.

As reported by Rohingya voices, “The United States has a critical role in defending our human rights, especially because other countries often follow its lead. The United States has already taken some key steps to respond to the latest violence against the Rohingya. It has provided more than \$542 million in aid to the Rohingya community, and it has issued sanctions and travel bans against some top officials in the Myanmar military”⁴. According to reports, “In December 2018, Congress passed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 which prohibits funding for International Military Education and Training (IMET) and Foreign Military Financing (FMF) Program in Burma for fiscal years 2019 through 2023”⁵. Added to the aforesaid, on 8th July 2019, US Congress passed a resolution expressing the sense of the Senate that the Governments of Burma and Bangladesh ensure the safe, dignified, voluntary, and sustainable return of the Rohingya refugees who have been displaced by the campaign of ethnic cleansing conducted by the Burmese military and to immediately release unjustly imprisoned journalists”⁶.

JAPAN:

The revitalisation of relations between Myanmar and the United States has also cast a positive shadow on Japan’s policy toward Myanmar, leading to an enhanced Japanese presence in terms of aid as also a rise in the investment of Japanese companies. It is another principal player in this multilateral scramble for power and influence in a highly competitive climate. Not to remain behind, this Asian economic power house has joined the fray by offering economic aid as well as rejuvenating investment into the newly reforming country. Japan is one of the countries that has assisted Myanmar, most consistently, in nearly every sector from development to health to education. Tokyo has maintained relations with Myanmar, refraining from hitting the country with sanctions like those enacted by the U.S. and Europe.

It’s Official Development Assistance for infrastructural development and humanitarian assistance along with massive investment in Thilawa Special Economic Zone have marked a strong Japanese presence in the country. The joining of forces by Japan and Thailand in Myanmar on the now revitalised Dawei megaproject coupled with India’s seeking of Japanese investment to develop the overland infrastructure in the Northeast is likely to pose a challenge to the Chinese overshadowing presence in the region. In addition, the plans of developing Dawei-Chennai Corridor is likely to be perceived as forming some sort of an India-Myanmar-Thailand-Japan quadrilateral partnership against the overarching role of any dominant power in the region.

To quote Prime Minister Abe during his meeting with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi in October 2019, “Japan will continue to provide maximum support by bringing together both its public and private sectors.” Both leaders also exchanged views regarding “the promotion of investment and creation of employment, including development of the Thilawa Special Economic Zone”⁷.

REPUBLIC OF KOREA:

If one were to look at Myanmar’s economic linkages with Asian countries, one country with which it has close ties is South Korea. As of August 2019, South Korea was the sixth largest investor in Myanmar. An Asian economic powerhouse, South Korea is looking to benefit from Myanmar’s economic potential. “As part of its flagship policy, Myanmar is one of Korea’s focus countries. Myanmar’s strategic location between China and India and its abundance of natural resources are major attractions for South Korea”⁸. According to media reports, “Myanmar has emerged as the most popular destination for Korean financial firms”⁹. Through its engagements in Myanmar, it is seeking to strengthen its ‘New Southern Policy’.

Cooperation on development projects between the two countries have become a model for bilateral cooperation for both countries. Like many other countries, South Korea is also providing assistance in capacity building. Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) too has been providing Myanmar assistance in areas like education, health and micro-credit. “The Korean government has also been helping rural community development projects in Myanmar”¹⁰.

Korea is also conquering the cultural wave in Myanmar. K-pop and Korean soap operas, cuisine and culture have cast a great influence in the opening up of the market in Myanmar. (In other words, Myanmar is also under Hallyu wave). The ‘Korean Wave’ is on its way.

President Moon Jae-in during his visit to Myanmar in September 2019 highlighted upon a ‘Korea Myanmar Industrial Complex (KMIC) Project’. According to him, “the project is ‘a signature cooperation’ between the two countries that will accelerate Korean companies to investment in Myanmar and significantly contribute to economic growth. Both countries have agreed to establish the \$110-million-worth (166.2 billion kyats) KMIC in Hlegu, north of Yangon. Around 200 Korean companies are expected to invest in the production facilities, which will generate a projected \$10 million in taxes annually”¹¹.

“The two countries have agreed for the establishment of Korea Desk in Myanmar—a one-stop service center to aid incoming Korean investors in Myanmar”¹². Both countries have further entered into cooperation in “shipping, shipyard upgrades, logistics and port development and management; science and technological cooperation; fields startups and innovation; and a framework agreement concerning loans from the Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF) from 2018 through 2022, with Korea offering \$100 million to support the economic development of Myanmar”¹³.

BUDDHIST NATIONALISM: Majority-Minority Divide

Myanmar also cannot be ignored because of the rising ‘majority-minority’ divide and the recent upsurge of the Buddhist nationalism in the country. “One of the darkest aspects of Myanmar’s political transition is a surge in religious intolerance, especially toward Muslims”¹⁴. In the wake of the alleged violence and repression (since 2012) in the Rakhine state, several thousand Rohingyas have been killed and displaced as a result of the communal clash between the Rakhine Muslims and the Rakhine Buddhists. This historic conflict in the Rakhine state has further complicated the religious landscape of the country. The relations between Buddhist and Muslim communities remain strained and potentially volatile. The outburst of Buddhist nationalism may have long-term implications and the impact is going to be widespread, influencing the security of the entire region of the Asia-Pacific. The widening of this ‘majority-minority’ divide has been an unfortunate development in Myanmar.

On this particular front, the advocate of democracy—Aung San Suu Kyi seems to have failed to act, which otherwise would have been crucial in mainstreaming them. Her critics also appear to be at loggerheads for not having come out openly on this issue of worsening sectarian violence. It appears that she has no control over the crisis as the military seems to be controlling the situation and three key portfolios in Myanmar—the Home, Defense and Border Affairs still remains under the stronghold of the Generals. She also does not seem to alienate the majority of Bamar Buddhists at the cost of minority Rohingya Muslims. Thus, consolidating her position amidst the waves of sectarian violence and widening rift between the Buddhist majority and Muslim minority is another formidable challenge faced by the leadership in Myanmar and the region as well.

It has also hit the economy badly. The Rohingya crisis, which has led to a rocky couple of years for the NLD government. FDI in Myanmar declined significantly from US\$9.5 billion in fiscal 2015-2016 to US\$6.6 billion in 2016-2017 and US\$5.6 billion in 2017-18—its lowest level since 2013. Sean Turnell, a special economic consultant to the Myanmar State Counselor, admitted last year that “the Rakhine crisis remains a significant hurdle for the NLD government’s economic reform effort, as it is scaring off tourists and investors, especially from the West”¹⁵.

One noticeable point in this regard has been that emerging economies of Asia including China, Japan, and Republic of Korea have extended their economic presence irrespective of Big powers of the West withdrawing their active presence.

INDIAN CONNECTION¹⁶:

Myanmar matters to country like India because of the strong Indian connections found there. The historical and cultural linkages between India and Myanmar abound our mythologies and contemporary literature¹⁷. The amazing zeal of the early Buddhists from India having laid the foundation for this inexhaustible association between the two countries is eternal. Attracted by the opportunities of the fertile land and flourishing trade, Indians have been settling in Myanmar for centuries. It was during British rule that cheap Indian labour was used to exploit the colonial economy. Agricultural labourers were imported to Myanmar to cope up with the heavy demands of the big plantation and intensive rice cultivation. A large number of middle-class intellectuals were also used as civil servants and administrators. Many of them were employed as lawyers, doctors and they were pioneers in the field of education. Indians were also found in Myanmar as traders, shopkeepers and money lenders. The migration of Indians to Myanmar during the colonial era and their role in the commercial sphere contributed to commercial relations between the two British colonies.

Indian migration to Myanmar continued in several waves and they have been a major force influencing the internal political dynamics of the country till the advent of the military rule. It was this dominating role by the Indians in the form of money lenders or the colonial civil servants, intelligentsia or the working class which brought about xenophobia in the minds of the military ruler General Ne Win. Thereafter, assuming power in 1962, he started the nationalisation drive. Their marginalisation after the introduction of the military rule and the Socialist Programme policies in the sixties sounded the death knell to a large section of the Indian population in Myanmar. People of Indian origin who have moved about to Myanmar since centuries presently constitute almost 4 percent of the population. The *Burmanisation* policy of General Ne Win and his "Burmese road to Socialism" nationalised all small businesses, banks and warehouses, denied trading licenses to aliens, and prohibited non-Burmese from taking government jobs. Mass migration was underway as thousands of Indians living in Myanmar returned to their country of origin. Those who were left behind were reduced to the status of an alien minority with very few being granted the citizenship rights. The problem of assimilation, integration and present status of Indians remain a critical issue, while many still not enjoying full citizenship rights.

Security and stability in India's Northeast have also been a guiding principle behind India's Myanmar policy under its larger foreign policy goal towards eastern neighbours. The porous border of Northeast India with Myanmar has been a flourishing ground for drug trafficking, arms smuggling, illegal migration and insurgency in the region. The absence of economic opportunities in the region combined with ongoing insurgency having cross-border linkages has raised concerns for the overall stability and development of the region. Development and economic prosperity of Northeastern States of India, therefore, are priority areas of our Act East Policy. In this regard, the proximity of the region to Myanmar offers immense opportunities. Amidst the strategic significance of the region, India aims to make its northeastern region as a pivot for its connectivity to the rest of Southeast Asia by bridging the missing link via Myanmar.

Relations between India and Myanmar were practically non-existent for three decades after the military coup in 1962, when Myanmar went into a self-imposed isolation, cutting itself from a major part of the world. In spite of these adversities, India enjoyed a 'soft corner' in the hearts of people in Myanmar. This got manifested itself in India acting as a refuge for pro-democratic forces in the wake of '8888 movement' when India expressed its displeasure with the ongoing military crackdown on them. As a consequence, though it boosted 'people-to-people' relationship, but drastically scaled down the 'Government-to-Government' relationship between the two countries. This has led to certain fluctuations in the relevance accorded to Myanmar in the 'strategic calculus' of India.

The relations were further strained between the two countries when Indian government bestowed the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding in 1993 to the Nobel laureate and the current State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. This gesture, however further strengthened 'people-to-people' relationship and pro-democracy activists found a 'safe haven' in India. Nevertheless, this relationship was short-lived and soon the Government took a 'U-turn' in its policy towards engaging with Myanmar. Therefore, by mid 1990s in line with a new foreign policy orientation popularly known as 'Look-East Policy' and 'Act East Policy' in recent times, India became more realistic in its approach in dealing with Myanmar. As a result, a deeper engagement followed with the military *junta* compromising with India's 'ideological' position on return to democracy in Myanmar. This shift was prompted by "a number of key security, energy, economic and geostrategic interests that could not have been achieved without its cooperation."¹⁸ Given their shared geo-political history and cultures, India can play a crucial role in facilitating Myanmar's political reforms in course of the implementation of its much-heralded 'Act East Policy' with a broader view to bolster relations with its other Southeast Asian neighbours.

After decades of isolation, India's eastern neighbour - Myanmar is now perceived as a link to the new markets. The transformation of 'Look East Policy' into the much coveted 'Act East Policy' has also added to the significance of Myanmar in India's foreign policy considerations. Over the years, India's policy towards Myanmar has been largely shaped by security and stability at the borders, diffusing cross-border insurgent groups, and economic development of its North-eastern states. Accordingly, Myanmar has extended all support for curbing insurgency and militancy on its borders. It has given assurance that it will not allow insurgent groups to use its territory against India. Reciprocity on the Indian side is visible in supporting Myanmar to promote democratic values and re-build its institutions along with socio-economic reforms.

So far as India's interest in Myanmar is concerned, it is stepping up its development cooperation in the light of Myanmar's continuing reform process. It is also rejuvenating its historical and cultural ties. It is trying to leverage on 'soft' power diplomacy and fostering deeper economic and business links. For boosting its engagement with Myanmar, India has kept its focus on 'Development Assistance', supported through grants-in-aid, lines of credit, training programmes, and provisions for expert knowledge and capacity building initiatives thereby overpowering the Chinese economic clout which are more commercial in nature through loans at high rates of interest. This is particularly noticeable in the field of health and education; infrastructural development and energy cooperation; trade and commerce; transport and communication; parliamentary training and support for ethnic reconciliation initiatives.

As a result, India has successfully established centres for industrial training and enhancement of IT skills and other capacity building programmes. The 'High Impact Community Development Projects' and the 'Border Areas Development Projects' have been crucial in reaching out to States in the border regions of Myanmar and boosting people to people contacts¹⁹. In its recent efforts under 'India-Myanmar Friendship Project' India has handed over 250 pre-fabricated houses in the Rakhine State for the rehabilitation of refugees after their return. According to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, "the extent and depth of the India-Myanmar relationship is visible in the robust development cooperation partnership, which has a strong "people first" philosophy.....India stands ready to enhance our development partnership with Myanmar.....And, do so as per the priorities of the Myanmar Government"²⁰.

For Myanmar, its India policy is more guided by 'soft-power' connections and cultural diplomacy. Though shared historical-cultural linkages between India and Myanmar abound our mythologies and literature, the influence that India has on this captivating land cannot be underestimated. Along with the shared cultural and historical lineage, India has a great deal to offer. Religion, spiritualism and film industry in the form of '*Buddhism, Yoga and Bollywood*' have been the strength of India's 'soft power diplomacy' and it has been a connecting ground with Myanmar for centuries. Therefore, it may be said that India is a neighbour which Myanmar cannot afford to ignore.

Nevertheless, its engagement with India in recent times in the economic field and trade statistics have not been satisfactory which has just reached 1.6 billion in the year 2017-18. The two countries have also signed several bilateral investment promotion agreements facilitating their venture in each other's country. As of August 2019, India's investment in Myanmar reached \$768 million, ranking 11th in the line-up of foreign investors with 31 permitted enterprises. The range of areas covered by Indian projects includes roads, railways, telecom, power, energy, hydrocarbons, remote sensing, agriculture, industry, IT, health-related services and education. Several Indian companies are already making inroads such as ONGC Videsh Limited, Jubilant Oil and Gas, Escorts, Tata Motors, Essar Energy, RITES, Apollo, CIPLA, Ranbaxy, Cadila Healthcare Ltd, Dr. Reddy's Lab. and Century Ply.

Myanmar's oil and gas has attracted the largest foreign investment. Funding some of the projects under technical and economic cooperation programme has been another feature of Indo-Myanmar partnership. Defence cooperation has also been marked by regular exchanges of high-level visits and bilateral military exercises. The coordinated patrol (CORPAT) by the two navies started in March 2013 aims to enhance mutual understanding and foster improved professional interaction between the two navies for maritime interoperability and to address terrorism, illegal fishing, drug trafficking, human trafficking, poaching and other illegal activities. Areas of bilateral defence cooperation also include among others: maintaining security, peace and stability along the border and capacity building for *Tatmadaw*.

Education is a crucial area where India exercises competitive advantage in Myanmar for building a sustainable academic partnership between the two countries. Decades of isolation and poverty have taken a toll on education therefore, building up an effective workforce in Myanmar requires higher Centres of Excellence and Learning. Myanmar attaches high priority to education and is calling for increased investment in this sector. Enhancing strong academic links between institutions of India and Myanmar and replicating best learning practices will help in human resource development and contribute to social and economic transformation of the country.

In the wake of the regime transformation and the new political dynamics emerging in Myanmar, India will now have to push more vigorously to expand its economic interests. India's economic involvement in

Myanmar, largely through the public sector, has not been up to the mark with complaints about implementation delays and quality controls. This gap, however, must be bridged by the Indian private sector which might make inroads, as opportunities expand in this land of golden pagodas. The building of rail-road connectivity through Myanmar to other Southeast Asian countries and reviving old rail-road links from Assam to Vietnam calls for much attention. Investment in agriculture, industry, banking sector, education, health, transport and communication is urgently required by India, besides its existing share in pearls and pulses, timber, oil and natural gas projects. Last but not the least, engagement with the *Tatmadaw*, NLD and the ethnic parties and Track II diplomacy at the level of civil society, cultural and academic exchanges may go a long way in strengthening ties between the two countries.

Regime transformation and political developments in Myanmar since the last few years have opened a new chapter in India-Myanmar relation. Given the political transformation taking place in Myanmar, the country offers immense opportunities for re-engagement which India may use to its strategic advantage. The traditional relation of friendship and cooperation between the two countries could be deepened and intensified further to each other's mutual benefit. Since both nations share a common thread of cultural ancestry, Myanmar may have to learn a lot in modern times from Indian experience of democratic decentralisation and federal reforms.

It is in this context that political developments in our neighbourhood cannot be overlooked and the centuries-old shared frontiers cannot be transformed into a distant neighbour ignoring the civilisational ties and the exigencies of *realpolitik* in the contemporary times amidst the emerging rivalry in the Indo-pacific region.

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