

INDIA-MYAMMAR RELATIONS: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract: The paper is an attempt to analyse the India-Myanmar relations and its problems and prospects. Myanmar occupies a central place in India's "Look East Policy" now renamed as "Act East Policy", as Myanmar is India's gateway to ASEAN and it is the only ASEAN country which has both land and maritime border with India. India-Myanmar relations have become important since the late 1990s, with India's focus on its "Look East Policy" and increasing concern for its Northeast region. Emerging geopolitical shifts in South and Southeast Asia and the increasing wave of globalization after the end of the cold war brought about the need for a new orientation in India's foreign policy. India's relation with Myanmar is of utmost importance in the context of India's new orientation area specific approach to its security as well as economic interests. The paper discusses factors that drive Indian foreign policy towards Myanmar. India "Act East Policy", development of Northeast regions, China's strategic position in Myanmar, economic dimension, India's energy interest in Myanmar and security and defense of India are major factors that drive India's foreign policy towards Myanmar. The paper also analyses the challenges in India-Myanmar relations. China factor, issues of insurgency in its North East India, ethnic conflict in Myanmar and drug trafficking are the major issues that have occasionally had an unsettling effect on the growing relations between the countries. The rapid improvement in bilateral ties and improvement of socio economic conditions would solve the problem of ethnic separatism and refugee issues both within Northeast India and Myanmar with the successful implementation of the objectives of the "Act East Policy". India and Myanmar as leading members of BIMSTEC and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation along with Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, their active cooperation is considered to be of great help to India for furthering its influence and ties amongst the Southeast Asian countries.

Keywords: Foreign policy, Security, “Look East Policy”, “Act East Policy” etc.

Introduction:

India and Myanmar have a historical connection that goes back to the 5th century A.D. and since they have been enjoying mutual contact in the realm of trade, commerce, religion, law, political philosophy, culture etc. Both the countries came under the British colonial rule, and Burmese leaders were associated with Indian leaders during the struggle for national independence. India-Myanmar relations were cordial and friendly during 1948-1962. The Prime Minister U Nu and Prime Minister Nehru were quite close to each other. But the military took power in 1962, their relations began to congeal. The frozen ties began to thaw after India adopted its “Look East Policy” in 1991. India and Myanmar transmit to each other as immediate neighbours, linked by geography, history and age-old ties of religion, culture and interaction at people’s level. Myanmar occupies 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 occupies a central place in India’s “Look East Policy” as Myanmar is India’s gateway to ASEAN and it is the only ASEAN country which has land and maritime borders with India. India-Myanmar relations have become importance since the late 1990s, with India’s focus on its “Look East Policy” and increasing concern for its Northeast region. During the last two decades, there has been a fundamental change in the India-Myanmar relations highlighted by a shift from state-driven, security-centric, insurgency-focused, and narrowly defined relations to market and integration driven, development-centric, resources-based comprehensive engagement.¹ Since 1993, India’s relationship with Myanmar has been guided by pragmatism as it has realised that political, economic and military relationship must be strengthened to maintain peaceful environment in its North-East region. Due to this changing foreign policy of India over the last few decades, a radical change in India-Myanmar relationship can be observed because of the reasons like, the economic development of North-East region, India’s increasing trade with ASEAN, India’s search for energy security, increasing Chinese involvement in Myanmar and the security implications because of militant activities in North-East India. Ever since India has initiated its “Look East Policy”, Myanmar has gained prominence in the India’s foreign policy as the success of its “Look East Policy” depend very much on maintaining cordial relation with Myanmar. India has also started investing heavily in Myanmar becoming one of Myanmar’s largest investors, investing in sectors such as oil and gas, agriculture, fisheries, pearls cultivation, infrastructure, mining and tourism.²

Problems:

India-Myanmar relations is developing in the right direction. But various problems continue to surround this developing relation. Some of the problems can be discussed as follows:

1. **Insurgency in India’s North East Regions and drug trafficking:** The emergence of ethnic insurgencies and separatist movement since the independence in North East India has been a challenge to

India's internal security, peace and stability in the regions. Many active militant groups take shelter in Myanmar. Close ties with Myanmar will help India persuade Myanmar government not to take anti-India elements in India. North eastern region is a natural bridge between India and Southeast Asia. The use of Myanmar as the hiding base of the Indian insurgents has been influencing India's perception of security and stability in the Northeast. The porous nature of the border between India and Myanmar has been a flourishing ground for drug trafficking and illegal arms trade in the region. This problem of drug trafficking is another issue where India needs Myanmar's co-cooperation. Several incidents of insurgency, couple with drug trafficking and ethnic conflicts in the border areas have created troubles for both countries.³ India-Myanmar collaborative initiatives are aimed at improving connectivity between north eastern India and western Myanmar by booming the local economics and bilateral trade. Development of Northeast Region cannot be achieved as long as the insurgency problem continues to exist.

2. China factor: India perceives China as a threat to its own economic, political and military interests. Chinese presence all along the Myanmar's border is perceived as a direct threat to India's security. Myanmar has very close economic and military relations with China since 1970. Through Myanmar, China gets easy access to the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea which is a cause of concern for India's security. China's ties with Myanmar are much stronger and dominant in all aspects political, economic, strategic and military as compared to India. Thus, improvement and revival of India-Myanmar relations is extremely needed in order to counter the challenges of 'rising China'. K.M. Pannikar argued that "The defence of Myanmar in fact is the defence of India's primary concern no less than Myanmar'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 Myanmar."⁴ So far, India has been lagging behind China and facing difficulty in influence and presence in Myanmar due to factors like India's lagging economy, the backwardness of the areas bordering Myanmar and separatist insurgencies in the northeast regions.

3. Ethnic conflict in Myanmar: Since the time of independence, the ethnic tribes of Myanmar has been alienated from the mainstream. The northern tribes remain under developed and suffer neglected for so many years. Barnar, the major community of the Burmese population, live in the fertile and more developed southern Myanmar. There is a huge gap between Barnar and other ethnic tribes in developmental terms. This has given rise to a sense of alienation among ethnic tribes which has been one of the major factors in waging relentless wars for their independence. Myanmar's Muslim minority is also facing increasing Buddhist nationalist violence thus creating instability in regions of Myanmar critical to both India and China.⁶ Myanmar is a multiethnic society and its diversity is reflected in the multiplicity of its ethnic groups. In Myanmar's polity, ethnic are represented by their political parties, armed groups and civil society organisations that have different goals and orientations. There is a long history of strife among the ethnic groups and also of tensions and conflicts within several of them.⁷

4. Lack of Transport, Connectivity and Communication: The domestic and international transport and connectivity of Myanmar is at significantly lower stages of development. The rail network has not grown within the country and suffers from severe lack of investment. The availability of modern communication networks in Myanmar is minimal. On the Indian side, the North Eastern Regions is characterised by geographical remoteness, inherent deficiency in infrastructure and the bad publicity for recurrent ethnic strife and militant activities. This has hindered the region in becoming an attractive destination for private investments and regional trade.⁸

Prospects:

Despite having various problems, there is a huge potential for better relations between India and Myanmar. Some of the prospects of the relation can be discussed as below:

1. Act East Policy or Look East Policy: One major change in Indian foreign Policy in the early 1990s was the shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment. The “Look East Policy” has emerged as an important foreign policy initiative of India in the post-cold war period. The essential philosophy of the “Look East Policy” is that India must find its destiny by linking itself more and more with its Southeast Asian and East Asian partners and the rest of the World, and that India’s future and economic interests are best served by greater integration with East and Southeast Asia countries. India’s “Look East policy” cannot be successfully pursued without involving Myanmar. Myanmar is a huge part of India’s “Look East Policy” it is a bridge between India and Southeast Asia. The government under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao was facing the problems of the Indian stagnant economy and the challenges posed by the new world order. The Narshimha Rao government was primarily oriented to revive the economy through taking the opportunities emanating from globalization and liberalization. Coordinating with the fast growing economics of South East Asia was an important change in this direction.⁹

2. Development of North East Regions: Economic and infrastructural development of NER: New Delhi is planning to convert its Northeast from a security burden to a region of economic prosperity by taking advantage of Myanmar as a gateway to Southeast Asia. Maintaining better relations and more co-ordination with Myanmar could check the insurgency problem in this region.¹⁰ The economic development of the Region is largely dependent on the extent of the Indo-ASEAN trade transaction over the land route. Stable and vibrant India-Myanmar relations are essential for a peaceful, stable and developed North East. North-east is geographically closer to Myanmar. Thus, economic growth and development and meeting needs of consumer goods of North-East is easier and more viable and economical through assistance from Myanmar than through cumbersome, expensive and time taking transport of goods from rest of India.

3. Energy Security: Another reason which drives India in its Myanmar policy is that it is keen to maintain a stable bilateral relationship because of Myanmar’s rich oil and natural gas resources that its booming economy desperately needs. India has been “searching the world” for energy resources and

Myanmar could be India's nest door supplies. The increasing rate of economic growth in India has led to the gradual and continuous rise in its energy requirement. At present India is trying to cultivate the, Myanmar government to import oil and natural gas. Various state and private enterprises of India is seeking to explore Myanmar's vast reserves of oil and natural gas. India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Videsh Limited (OVL), Gas Authority of India (GAIL), Essar Energy and some other enterprises and companies have stakes in Myanmar's different onshore and offshore blocks for exploration and production.¹¹

4. Economic Development: The government under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao was primarily oriented to revive the economy in order to co-ordinate with the fast growing economies of Southeast Asia. The East and Southeast Asian countries have become India's most priority areas of co-operation under the frameworks of economic diplomacy. Bilateral trade relations between the two countries are growing. The economic engagement between India and Myanmar has expanded into the public and private sectors. India is one of Myanmar's major trading partners and one of the largest markets for its export goods. The border trade has become the driving force of development of border areas between the two countries. Border trade is also helping in increasing public-to-public relationship more closely which can lessen border disputes and racial problems. Economic engagement and technical cooperation is characterised by complementarities among the members and this helps in maximizing the mutual benefits of all involved. As India and Myanmar are both part of the regional associations like BIMSTEC, BCIM, MGCs and ASEAN, regional integration can produce win-win outcomes in both quantity and quality of economic growth for mutual benefits.¹²

Recent Development:

Some of the recent developments in India-Myanmar relations are listed below:

1. Inauguration of ICP at Moreh, Tamu and Mizoram.
2. Opening of land route on August 8, 2018.
3. People to People contact, Manipur and Mandalay women football friendly match at Imphal and Mandalay.
4. Added 22 other items in 2012.
5. Increase of volume of trade.
6. Improve trade and cultural relations.
7. Golden Myanmar airlines flight at the Sangai festival.
8. Border trade was converted into normal trade in 2015.

MoU: India-Myanmar Signed on September, 2017 at Myanmar

Lists of MoUs/Agreements signed during State visit of Prime Minister to Myanmar.

1. Memorandum of Understanding on Maritime Security Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

2. Cultural Exchange Programme between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar for the year 2017-2020.
3. Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and the Government of the Republic of India on Enhancing the Cooperation of the Up gradation of the Women's Police Training Centre at Yamethin, Myanmar.
4. Memorandum of Understanding for sharing White Shipping Information between the Indian Navy and Myanmar Navy.
5. Technical Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar for providing Coastal Surveillance System.
6. Memorandum of Understanding between the Central Drug Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of the Republic of India and Food and Drug(FDA), Ministry of Health and Sports of Myanmar on Cooperation in Medical Products Regulation.
7. Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Health and Family welfare of the Republic of India and the Ministry of Health and Sports of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar on cooperation in the field of Health and medicine.
8. Exchange of Letter for Extension of MoU on the establishment of MIIT.
9. Exchange of Letter for Extension of MoU on the establishment of India-Myanmar centre for Enhancement of IT-Skill.
10. Memorandum of Understanding in the field of election between the Election Commission of India and the Union Election Commission of Myanmar.
11. Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation between Myanmar Press Council and the Press Council of India.

Suggestions and Recommendations:

The following steps need to be taken up for improving India-Myanmar Relations.

1. Development of Tourism.
2. Medical tourism.
3. Need to establish Department of International Relations, Department of Southeast Asian studies and Department of East Asian studies and languages at the Manipur University.
4. Need to establish Think-Tank related activities with focus on Southeast Asia or Chinese foreign policy at the Manipur University.
5. Development of infrastructure.
6. Development of road and connectivity projects.
7. Development of border regions.
8. MU need to collaborate with Myanmar and Thailand universities and organise exchanges programmes.
9. Promote skill development industry.

10. Manipur Government need political will.
11. To promote co-operation of ASEAN countries to balance China.
12. To counter Chinese economic influence in the Southeast Asia region.
13. The English language proficiency of India can facilitate the pace of co-operation with Myanmar over China.
14. 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.
15. 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. 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. Beside government to government relations, people to people contact needs to be emphasised to develop strong ground level relations. Without the help of Myanmar government, India will find it difficult to realise its goals. There are various problems in this direction, thus India need to cautiously orient its foreign policies.

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