

Prospects of Indo-Myanmar Relation in the 21st Century

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Abstract : On June 4th, 2015, some militants attacked on Indian Army Convoy in the district of Chandel in the North Eastern State of Manipur, killing 18 members of Indian Army's 6th Dogra Regiment. The attackers took refuge in neighbouring Myanmar crossing the Indian Border. On June 9 a contingent of Indian Army's Special Forces entered into Myanmar and killed the militants there. The cross border raid was made possible with the assistance of the Myanmar Government. This incident highlights the importance and dynamics of Indian Foreign Policy in the 21st century in general and Indo-Myanmar relations in particular.

Key words : Presence foreign policy of India, economic dimensions, strategic dimensions, ASEAN, Indo-Myanmar Relation.

Major concerns of Indian Foreign Policy at present :

A look at the concerns of the Indian Foreign Policy in the present century reveals two-fold dimensions, Firstly Globalisation necessitated India's Economic growth along with a pluralist, secular and democratic society. This in turn, required a peaceful and conducive environment around. That is, a helpful and positive attitude of the international community at large towards India would be instrumental in transforming India into a Global Economic Power.

The International situation

Secondly, the International system in the 21st century, to speak politically, is undergoing a gradual process of evaluation. There has been a shift from a Mono-power centric order to more diffused power structure. Though, it cannot be called a multi polar world yet. Moreover Globalisation and Technological advancements have benefited the world alike. But these have also exposed collective vulnerability as terrorism, radicalism, economic inequality and to talk the volatility of the Financial Market. All these put forward the need for a concerted effort across the nations for a peaceful, harmonious world order. And India is no exception in this regard.

Myanmar

The Immortal character of Srikanta sketched by the legendary novelist Sri Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay brings the reference of Burma (The modern Myanmar) frequently.

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Even an age old Hindi song reminds us of 'Rangoon' to be the common destination for Indians in the 21st century. Historically speaking, Britain turned Burma into an Indian province from 1886 to 1937 with its capital at Rangoon. Burma was separated from India in 1937. there were nationalist struggles against the British raj throughout the period. Finally Burma became independent on 4th January 1948.

Burma (now called Myanmar) has been ethnically the most strife-torn nation so far. Its military played a strong role all through and still occupies a pivotal role in administration. However the country has been experiencing democratic regimes since 2008 onwards.

India vis-a-vis Myanmar

Myanmar's Geo-political location makes the Indo-Myanmar relation most important and distinct compared to other nations of the region, socially, economically and strategically. Myanmar shares common social, historical, cultural ties with India traditionally. Geographically the two countries share a 1643 Kilometer border between them. Consequently, it is the only Asian country which can add as a link between South Asia and South East Asia on the one hand and South Asia with East Asia inclusive of China on the other. It's a land bridge of India to connect the countries of ASEAN.

A treaty of friendship was signed between India and Myanmar in 1951. Rajiv Gandhi visited Myanmar in 1987. However Military rule quashed the democratic regime and took over in 1988. This continued for nearly two decades. India for many years distanced itself from the authoritarian regime in Myanmar. However, there has been a perceptible change in its orientation towards Myanmar even against the criticisms from the west. With the advent of the 21st century and with the process of institution building in Myanmar India gradually gets itself closer to Myanmar.

Economic Dimensions

This gradual evolution of Myanmar as a democratic state with less political instability and open market economy also encouraged India to play a positive and cooperative role. This would bring out a vast market for Indian Business and Investments. India has made significant commitments for increasing investments in Burma's infrastructural development and border development because the sensitive NE Region comes very close to Myanmar. Thus, Myanmar becomes more important for INDIA both economically and strategically. Hence, high level visits between the two nations become frequent, eg-visit of PM Narendra Modi very recently or Sushma Swaraj 's the external affairs minister in 2015. Viewed from the economic scenario, there are certain developments which have taken place so far:

- During P.M. Manmohan Singh's visit in 2012 many new initiatives were announced in 2012 and a dozen of MOUs signed along with the line of credit for five hundred million dollars.
- Myanmar is also under a duty free tariff preference scheme for least developed countries.
- Bilateral trades between the two states, has grown from 12.4 million in 1981 to 2.18 billion dollars in 2013-14.
- India is also a chief importer of agrarian produces from Myanmar (beans pulses etc).
- Many Indian Companies like Tata ESSAR GAIL ONGC etc have invested in core sectors like power and energy. Tata established a heavy Turbo Trunk assembly plant. Some of the major projects initiated by India include the Kaladan Project connecting Kolkata with Sittwe Port in Myanmar.

Strategic Dimensions

Apart from the economy, there are Strategic aspects which need to be addressed.

- PM Narsimha Rao understood the importance of South East Asia and Far East Strategically. He announced India's 'Look East Policy' (LEP) from a platform in Singapore. Even though Myanmar became a full member of ASEAN in 1997, India did not attach any special role to Myanmar in the ASEAN context. However it was included in the LEP for its strategic importance.
- The North East Region, Myanmar and ASEAN:
India's North East Region shares a common boundary with the western states and divisions of Myanmar. Any ethnic unrest in that region has every chance to penetrate and disrupt the balance in the North East Region and thereby pose a security threat to India's sovereignty. However, this security threat can be mitigated to a large extent by cooperation for border development arrangements involving both the countries. This would cover the North East Region of India and the western States and divisions of Myanmar bordering India under the LEP.
- ASEAN also plays a vital role in the socio-economic upliftment of the NE Region which would obviously include Myanmar within the developmental model. Any Infrastructural development in India's NE Region by Indo-ASEAN cooperative efforts must have its outlets in the adjoining areas of Myanmar too. At present Myanmar is part of central councils of ASEAN and performs the role of integrating NE Region within LEP on the one hand and India's cooperation with ASEAN on the other. Thus Myanmar stands as a bridge between India and ASEAN.

● **Role of China:**

Myanmar lies between two large neighbors China and India. This poses a severe security threat to India's stability. Myanmar is a strife-torn nation on ethnic lines. Almost the entire border area of Myanmar is the home-land of the ethnic communities of which China state the Naga tribal areas of the Sagaing Division and the Kachin state border India. If its civil society is not administered efficiently by the Government of Myanmar, areas may be exploited by outside forces not only to create disruptions in Myanmar but also as a buffer state for supplying logistics to insurgent elements in India through NE Region, example of Kachin State is in point. China not only interfered there but also supplied material support to Indian Insurgents through the Kokang Armed Force as the intermediary. It is in India's interest that a political settlement between the ethnic people and the Myanmar State be arrived at the earliest, so that peace can be restored and the exploitation of the region by China could be stopped. Thus Indian Insurgents also could not get any refuge and training in that region.,

● Moreover, if the frontier area of Myanmar is not stabilized China by creating mischief in the region, would keep India occupied with this immediate problem. This will hinder the success of India's LEP policy to become a major power in the Asia Pacific Scene which China wants to dominate.

● **China vis-à-vis India**

China has become a soft power in the region through its socio-economic investments in Myanmar. Myanmar also provides alternative routes and connectivity to Chinese provinces to the Bay of Bengal. Myanmar in present age of democratic transition, seeks to lessen its dependence on Chinese defence support. India is being favoured as a potential source of defence supply as against China. This is perhaps because of China's Support to the brutal military regime in the post 1988 period in Myanmar while India decided to isolate Burma during the same period.

● Today, the point to be remembered is that since 1992 India has put emphasis on energy cooperation with Myanmar in that region. The Myanmar is a reservoir of energy resources (like petroleum and natural gas). The main issue for India is to set up a pipeline that would convey gas to India. China is a potential competitor in that field too.

● The subtle change in Myanmar's policy towards China has taken place under the new Government. India must take advantage of the situation if it has to counter China as the nearest economic and strategic competitor at this juncture. India has every merit over China in countering its super imposing influence. India has a democratic set up with its multi party system and periodic elections. India also encourages the democratic reforms and institutional building in Myanmar.

This brings India closer to the Myanmar Government. Thus India's prospect vis-a-vis China looks brighter currently.

- **The Sea routes and Myanmar:**

India also needs the South Eastern Sea face of Myanmar as an alternative routes to the NE Region. This would connect the NE Region to the Bay of Bengal and also the ASEAN region as a whole.

- India has Sea Lines of communication across the Indian Ocean. This is the Sea Route followed by the Merchant Navies to transport the Merchandise and energy from Gulf to East Asia. The security of these lines are challenged by piracy as well as other threats as trafficking in arms, drugs by Transnational criminal gangs. These issues have been discussed in East Asian Summit in 2015. These challenges also require regional cooperative responses including Myanmar.

- **Miscellaneous :**

To add, Myanmar also supports India's bid for the permanent membership of UN Security Council and the need to reform UNO to make it more representative, credible and effective.

- Myanmar also agreed to strengthen cooperation and collective efforts in fighting insurgencies across the border. It is in tune with the agreement that Myanmar supported the military operation of India on its soil in June 2015.

- **Myanmar's Perspective**

Foreign Policy is a bilateral relation. Viewed from this aspect, Myanmar's healthy relation with India is definitely fruit-bearing, since India stands as the most stable democratic state with a vast economic progress in the region.

Economic Considerations

- The Economic partnership between India and Myanmar brings positive effect on Bilateral Trades and Investments. Kaladan multi modal transport project, tri lateral highway project are some examples. The Tri lateral project would further the intent of LEP by providing a land link to South East Asia. Another area where India provided economic assistance to Myanmar is for reviving the Garment Industry in Myanmar inclusive of capacity building. If real progress is achieved and Myanmar's Garment Industry works as a sub unit by joining India's Textile Industry for bulk export, China's global dominance in this field may be challenged. This would help Myanmar earning more Foreign Revenues.

- In the Energy sector, India has extended enormous cooperation eg- renovation of Thanlyn Refinery, up gradation of the Thanbyakam Petrochemical Complex etc. Indian Companies are

involved in the exploration and production of gas as well as in the pipeline projects. The Indian Economy needs more energy resources for sustaining growth. Thus Myanmar can not only be a future exporter of Oil and gas to India, but also of Petrochemicals and fertilizers for Indian agriculture.

- BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral and Economic Cooperation) is also another platform which directs towards closer Trade and Economic relationship between India and Myanmar. Thus, with India's support and the continuation of gradual process of political democratization clubbed with an open market economy, Myanmar would soon create its own niche in South Asia as a major economic player.

Strategic Consideration

In today's world, Myanmar wants to maintain relations with China to an acceptable size. It wants to keep its two big neighbours in good terms by balancing between them. This is also necessary for restoration and perpetuation of peace and democracy in the state. More over European Union and Obama administration are also keen observers of political developments in Myanmar. Hence, it has to be quite steady and wise in deciding friends and foes. Once Aung San Suu Kyi said as the opposition leader 'Let's not be over optimistic about Burma'. What she meant to say was that Myanmar was in transition from one form of Government to another. She wanted India to help Myanmar in this stage of transition and help build a true democracy in Myanmar. India too has already supported the reform movement by encouraging relation on a parliament to a parliament basis and strengthening the grass root democratic institutions there.

ASSESSMENT

Precisely, these are in a nutshell, areas of involvement and convergence in the Indo-Myanmar relation. Any relation has to be rewarding to both the partners. May be someone gets more while some waits to climb up the ladder. This implies that there are fulfillments, aspirations as well as desperations or failures in relations among nations. Steps have been taken .Still a lot is to be done. There are areas where further explorations can continue, yet there is also a space for new hope and realization. In a way, it is all about a journey to the wonderland. We wish all the best.

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