

**INDIA-MYANMAR STRATEGIC RELATIONS: SINCE
INDEPENDENCE (1947)**

ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

The country of Burma now known as Myanmar, since 1989, got its independence, like India from Britain in 1948. The country is a sovereign country in Southeast Asia and is bordered by China, Thailand, India, Laos and Bangladesh. One-third of Myanmar's total perimeter of 1930 kilometers (1200 miles) forms an uninterrupted coast line along the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. At 676,578 km. (261, 227 sqm), it is the 40th largest country in Southeast Asia. Myanmar is also the 24th most populous country in the world with over 60.28 million people.

Myanmar has its land frontiers with China on the north and northeast 1384 miles (2226.85 Km.), Laos on the east 146 miles (234.91 Km.), Thailand on the southeast 1304 miles (2098.14 Km.), and Bangladesh 169 miles (271.92 Km.) and India on the west 903 miles (1452.93 Km.) The total length of land Boundaries is about 3906 miles (6284.75 Km.)

It is pertinent to note that Myanmar was a country where precious stones, oil, natural gas and other mineral resource where abundant. If we look up the history of Myanmar, it was the home to some of the early civilization of Southeast Asia, including the Pyu and the Mon dynasties. By the 4th century, most of the population residing in the Irrawaddy Valley

had converted to Buddhism. Of the many city-states, the largest and most important was Sri Ksetra, Southeast of modern Prome (Pyay). During this period, Burma was part of an overland trade route from China to India. Trade with India brought Buddhism from southern India. As early as 6th century, another group of people called the Mon began to enter the present-day Lower Burma from the Mon Kingdoms of Haribhunjaya and Dvaravati in modern - day Thailand.

Burma was inhabited by people of different origin, where past historical relations were often contentious. In the pre-colonial days, Burman kings routinely conquered other peoples and in this period consolidated their rule over a number of neighbouring kingdoms and principalities. The successes of such expansionist campaigns brought pride to the victors, but in some cases involved terrible massacres.

Inspite of the fact that Myanmar (formerly known as Burma till 1989) and India having close geographical contiguity, historically and culturally had been sharing each others common circumstances, still both had remained distinct from each other, till the end of 20th century. During the colonial period, both were part of the British rule in India. But after independence, both these new countries did not realize much to develop better co-ordination and co-operation for the mutual benefits of each other. Having major diplomatic relations with each other was not enough for

them, which shared many common factors. It was a kind of negligence on the part of both sides. Burmese having their typical way of living and inward looking community could not impress Indian politicians to develop meaningful neighbourly relations. The globalization process in 1990's and changed geostrategic environment in the world and particularly, in South Central and South East Asian regions, had opened the eyes of both the countries. Both countries had realized the importance of their geo-strategic advantages for betterment of both the countries.

The Burmese were basically a religious minded people in the conventional sense. The 'pongyis' (monasteries) were held in high esteem. Orthodox and old fashioned Burmese housewives had always cooked some extra food for the 'pongyis'. But the 'pongyis' were today a degenerate and discredited lot in the main stream and many of the 'pongyis chaungs' used to shelter anti-social elements not very long ago. The Shans first arrived in Burma in the 13th century of the Christian era.

Burma was an important kingdom during the 16th to the early 19th century. Located between Thailand and the Indian subcontinent, Burma's culture serves as a bridge between West Asia and Southeast Asia, both culturally and strategically. Burma's decline started with the ascendancy of Siam in the late 18th century which saw considerable centralization and development in the Central Southeast Asian Kingdom.

Prior to British India's conquest of Burma in 1886, the latter had undergone three stages of unification. The first one took place in the eleventh century, when the Burmese kings conquered their immediate neighbours and established an Empire of Pagan Dynasty, which lasted for about two hundred years. This was a golden period of Burma characterized by flourishing impact of Indian inspired culture. The second phase of unification of Burma came in the sixteenth century during the reign of Toungoo dynasty founded by Minkyinyo (1486-1531) and his son Tabinshwehti (1531-50).

The third Anglo-Burmese War, which took place in 1885, leading to the final annexation of Upper Burma occurred under different conditions. The most important condition was the strategic necessity of British Indian Empire which by 1858, had come under the direct control of His Majesty's Government at London. On the other hand, the French were pursuing an aggressive and ambitious policy in South-East Asia having lost to the British in other parts of the world. After annexation of coastal areas of Indo-China like Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, French designs to move towards Burma were suspected by the British in India. The threat to Indian security and British hegemony in Burma became more acute, when a commercial treaty was negotiated between Burma and France at Paris in January, 1885. On 22 October 1885, the British Viceroy sent an ultimatum

to the Burmese king Thibaw (which reached Mandalay on 30 October) calling upon him to submit to the British and take the position of a feudatory prince.

After the annexation of Burma, it was no smooth sailing for British administration in Burma, as they were faced with a series of rebellions and organised banditry which proved enormously expensive in terms of money, men and material. In order to control this situation, more than forty thousand Indian troops and police contingents were posted at different places.

Meanwhile, with the outbreak of Second World War in Europe in September 1939, the political climate of Europe, as well as Asia rapidly changed and neither Burma nor India was an exception to this changing scenario. The second World War and the Japanese occupation of Burma (1942-45) gave a new turn to the nationalist movement led by the Thakins. It also speeded up the process of political evolution in Burma. Keeping in view the relationship, it is pertinent to observe that Burma came under total Japanese occupation, where as India did not.

Thus, the independence of both the countries India and Burma, marked the end of an era of struggle of the different, but identical nationalist movement against the colonial rule of the British imperialists.

In the light of this, old association between the two countries during the pre-colonial period, as enunciated in this chapter, that the post independence relations between them will be analysed and assessed.

To the United States, Burma was a British preserve until World War II, except for American Baptist missionaries who, mostly in the nineteenth century, worked effectively among non-Burman and non-Buddhist groups, some of whom readily responded to their new teachings. The United States significantly contributed to the campaign to wrest Burma from the Japanese, who had occupied that country early in World War II. At an emotional or ideological level, President Franklin Roosevelt was interested in freeing the colonies from their colonial masters throughout Asia, but little or hardly any action took place in this regard. U.S. interests in Burma were essentially a product of the Cold War.

The defeat of the Kuomintang Nationalist Government in China in 1949 and the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1950, together with the Korean War that year, gave immediate focus to the anticommunist sentiment in the United States, which had already become apparent in Europe and in the American military occupation of South Korea (1945-48). An official investigative team was sent from Washington in 1950 to the countries of Asia, including Burma, to see what types of assistance the United State might provide to stem this perceived

communist advance (communist-inspired uprisings in Burma, the Philippines, Malaya and Vietnam).

Since the decline of the Soviet Union, Soviet Russia's foreign policy had evolved from a western-oriented one to a multi-dimensional one, with stronger focus on Southeast Asia. With the aim of establishing new contacts or to strengthen existing collaborations, the Russian policy-makers initially concentrated all their efforts on one goal- China. But soon the game took a different course from the one desired, when the over dependence on China started to threaten Russia's independent policy in the region and encouraged Russia to rethink its strategy.

Both countries were deeply involved in process of enforcement of certain ambitions- the Russians mostly oriented outwardly, the Myanmarese predominantly inward looking. At the same time, both States had a strong focus on their status within the international community. Myanmar, which remained one of the poorest countries in the world, had broken free from the bonds imposed by the British Empire, but had'nt been able to avoid a new intensive economic dependency on China. For that reason, Myanmar seeked the option of freeing itself from the influence of Beijing and searched for actors, such as Russia, who could offset the influencing factors of Myanmar's biggest neighbour.

Myanmar could not rely on Russia as a 'counterbalance' to China and would be compelled to find other alternatives in this respect, perhaps, more in the form of partnering with an association of State, rather than with a single country. To conclude, Russia and Myanmar could be observed more as friends in need, than as close allies that had similar strategic considerations with regard to the international community.

Through the ages, the perception in Myanmar had been that their country, surrounded by two giant neighbours in the West and North, should watch out carefully for the preservation of its security, territorial integrity and other interests. If not handled properly, these neighbours could pose serious threats, but if tackled wisely, they could be a source of valuable support and assistance. Traditionally, the fundamental approach of authorities in Myanmar, had been to engage in a balancing exercise between relations with China and with India. They may not had always succeeded in their endeavours, but that was the goal policy makers strived for. They were, that the operation of the said triangle depended not only on them, but also on the development of India-China relations, as well as on developments in the larger region, surrounding the three countries.

Chinese penetration into Myanmar was initially driven by the need to develop its Southern provinces, but the resultant diplomatic check on

India, was a welcome byproduct. Also, China happily filled up the "strategic vacuum" created by the withdrawal of the Western countries in the aftermath of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. Over the years, China's entrenchment in Myanmar had generated regional strategic challenges. As part of its logistic development work, China had built roads and railways that connected its Yunnan province to upper Myanmar, causing an influx of Chinese migrants into northern Myanmar, a cause of concern not only for Myanmar, but also for India. This unwelcome development prompted India and ASEAN to engage the regime to create a counterweight to the Chinese presence.

India's policy, which had been accommodative, understanding and benign, as opposed to China's assertive and self - centered policies, obviously touched the right chord with the military junta. India's help in critical areas and at critical times warmed the cockles of the junta's feelings. India offered a wide assortment of military equipments so as to avoid a situation in which Myanmar would be under constraints to rely on China for defence supplies. As an Indian strategic analyst had pointed out- 'the military cooperation between India and Myanmar paled in comparison to that between China and Myanmar through Myanmar, which had been facing problem caused by rather obsolete and outdated Chinese weapons, felt the need for an alternative source'.

India and Myanmar had strong historical ties since ancient times. The spread of Buddhism from India to Myanmar and vibrant cultural interactions, had often been referred to demonstrate the strong historical ties between the two countries. However, history had also given some unwanted baggage. It was during the British colonial times that India and Myanmar (then Burma) had intense interactions.

Although cross-border contact and movement of people was known throughout history, but they putting had not led to any strong economic interdependence between the two regions, viz., North-eastern regions, North-eastern region (NER) of India and Myanmar. In the pre-colonial era, cross- border contacts used to take place mainly through distance trade, war and invasion and of course, common racial affinities.

Look East policy was born out of compulsions, as much in the domestic front, as was in the external front. Given the socialist experiment and the insular economic policies, India's economy on the eve of the assumption of power by Narasimha Rao, was perilously close to the edge of the precipice foreboding collapse. The implosion of the Soviet Union, which was India's "valued economic and strategic partner", left India "friendless and marginalized". The nations of the East, which were earlier dismissed by India as "lackeys of American imperialism," were seen "delivering unprecedented prosperity to the people, thanks to the dramatic

economic reforms they had embarked on, long time ago." The altered global economic and strategic scenario in the post-Cold War period, made it imperative for India to redefine its foreign and economic policies. It was under these trying circumstances, that India ventured to launch an altogether new policy initiative called- Look East policy and later Act East Policy.

During World War II, K.M. Panikkar, a historian and a strategist, par excellence explained Myanmar's (erstwhile Burma) strategic significance to India as thus- "the defence of India's primary concern no less than Burma's to see that its frontiers remain inviolate. Infact, no responsibility can be considered too heavy for India when, it comes to the question of defending Burma."

Future prospect could be determined by yet another factor. Ranjit Gupta, a former ambassador, aptly argued that an enormous gulf remained between the relative positions of China and India in Myanmar. Noting with satisfaction that considerable progress had been achieved in the development of India-Myanmar relations since 2011, he opined that there was no need for India to contest China's position in Myanmar or to compete with China in Myanmar and advised India to continue with its 'pro-active engagement' with Myanmar.

India and Myanmar shared much common experience as both were geographically interlinked, culturally closer and politically fought against the British rule till they gained their independence. Geo-strategic compulsions on both the countries was such that it determined a minimum required degree of co-operation, mutual trust and certain common understanding to prevent security abrasion in both the countries, particularly in border areas. Present international politics was totally different than the Cold War period and therefore, most of the strategic structure of international politics had changed after the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991. From geo-strategic point of view, India, China, Japan and Southeast Asian countries experienced very altered relations to pursue and practice their strategic interests. Therefore, India worked overtime to build an altered strategy in Myanmar.

Myanmar's strategic significance had not been apparently reconisid by India, so much so, that it continued to be pre-occupied with the Kashmir issue on its north-western frontiers with Pakistan. India had perhaps, rightly focused its centre of gravity on Pakistan for obvious reasons, but this attitude required a re-think, as it had to address the long-term national perspective issues. China also occupied an important place in this strategic equation and it would be in the fitness of things to pragmatically reassess

the overall dimension and spectrum of regional affairs in South and Southeast Asia accordingly.

From the national security point of view, India's first priority was to work jointly with Myanmar to settle ethnic insurgencies in India's Northeast and North Myanmar. Quite rightly this was stated in the joint statement issued after Manmohan Singh's meeting with Thein Sein in late May 2012. As already stated, due to limited capacity, the Myanmar government was unable to take major military action against large number of tribal insurgents of most groups. Its negotiations with various groups addressed the issue of an inclusive political architecture.

The most important determinant would undoubtedly be Myanmar itself, particularly the road, that it would take in the next decade and more precisely, in course of 2015-16. It was maintained that there was a link between peace and stability in Myanmar and further blossoming of India-Myanmar relations, infact, it was a link that worked both ways.

For India, good relations with its neighbours were central to its foreign policy. Myanmar was geo-strategically important for India. The specific objective of building substantive co-operation and engagement between Myanmar and India, was to create co-operative arrangements

between the two countries to counter secessionist and terrorist activities in the border areas.

To conclude it is clear that Myanmar and India have now reached a level of relationship which is realistic and pragmatic and keeps the mutual demands and requirements in mind. The exchanges between the President of Myanmar and the Prime Minister of India have covered all areas that would provide the necessary content to the relations where mutual benefit is a visible plus and enables Myanmar to draw on India's developmental achievements that fit into Myanmar's socio-economic developments plans.

Myanmar-India relations were likely to thrive further on their own steam. But through a conscious and well planned endeavour, they could be strengthened and deepened in a far more perceptible manner and in a relatively short period. It is hoped that the two nations, not just their governments, but their societies too - will make the necessary investment in this vital relationship. There is no dearth of good ideas. What is needed is an increased public awareness of the potential of the relationship, the geopolitical stakes involved and the costs of suboptimal action. A new fountain of synergy should be created in the future, which will be pulled by a clear mutuality of interests, common values, shared experiences and a determined leadership.

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