

# **Chapter - 7**

**Future Relations between India and Myanmar**

## **FUTURE RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND MYANMAR :**

Before we go into the dynamics of the aspects of future relations between India and Myanmar, it becomes pertinent for us to go into brief background of economic, cultural, ethnic, social and political relations between the two countries.

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. Geo - strategic compulsions was determined by the basic characteristics and properties of the landscape. Therefore, basic frame - work and strategic planning was needed to be formulated, in view of changed regional structure.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Wagh, Laxman Popatrao., India-Myanmar Relations, Atul Prakashan, Kanpur, 2017, p. 194.

Myanmar's changing political state of affairs after the democratic opening, had made Indian, as well as Chinese interests vulnerable in the country. Both India and China had become more competitive, seeking economic and strategic edge in the resource rich Myanmar. There was a shift in Myanmar's dealings with both of them. While China enjoyed a privileged position, due to its diversified investment in the country, Myanmar adopted a "counter hedging strategy" by following an open door policy, when India entered the scene. However, it seemed that it was exploiting the fears of both its neighbours to gain maximum benefit by giving them investment opportunities, while at the same time, their interests remained vulnerable to changing state of mind in Myanmar.<sup>2</sup>

Regional structure of Myanmar, consisted of location, physiography, natural regions, population, ethnic groupings were important for the further study of Myanmar including its economy, security and foreign relations. As already mentioned earlier, Myanmar shared its land boundary with China, Laos, Thailand, Bangladesh and India. Geographically, Myanmar was located on Eastern Himalaya and its main source of surface water originated from Himalaya. About 90 percent population of Myanmar were Buddhist and Hindus constituted only 1.5 percent of their total population. The geographical factors were important and needed to be considered, while making any policy decisions in regard to Myanmar.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Humera, Iqbal., India- Myanmar Relations : Is there a Shadow of China ?, Regional Studies, South Africa, Vol. XXXI, No.2, Spring 2013, pp. 59.

<sup>3</sup> Wagh, Laxman Popatrao., India-Myanmar Relations, Atul Prakashan, Kanpur, 2017, p. 194.

Another important factor in dealing and formulating any foreign policy aspect with Myanmar was its economic structure. Economy of Myanmar was mostly agricultural based, where 60 percent of population directly depended on agriculture that fetched them 37 percent of their GDP. Apart from agricultural trade, manufacturing and livestock were the other two major components at domestic front. Myanmar teak wood was very significant and was in demand all over the world. Gems, non-metallic minerals and oil production in Myanmar constituted major portion of their economy. Hence, that was essential to be considered, while pursuing India's economic interest in Myanmar.<sup>4</sup>

### **STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF MYANMAR :**

India had realised the importance of Myanmar and its strategic significance in the right manner, to ascertain its actual values and what interest it could provide to it. Although, by itself, Myanmar did not pose any military threat to India, China had the capability of transforming the present coolness to intransigence. Moreover, Myanmar had the largest number of safe havens for insurgents based in Northeast India. Large scale drug peddling from across the border was another serious problem. Enough finance helped the Indian insurgents to smuggle narcotics and contrabands, which in turn, enabled them to finance arms purchase from Southeast Asian arms bazaars, thereby, keeping the Northeast active with insurgency. Myanmar's co-operation for the security of India's Northeast region and

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 194-195.

especially for stamping out ongoing insurgencies was of utmost importance.<sup>5</sup>

Myanmar's strategic significance had not been apparently recognised 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.

The other area that needed to be addressed urgently was reconciliation with the ethnic groups, where the issue of universal ceasefire still remained outside reach, as differences remained, including over issues related to the integration and control of the ethnic groups. The federation and autonomy issues also remained a major stumbling block, as far as the peace process was concerned.<sup>6</sup>

The ethnic groups also had major issues over the insistence of the armed forces on the six points put forward by Myanmar C-in-C General Min Aung Haling that the ethnic groups must commit themselves, to

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 195.

<sup>6</sup> Malik, Preet., *My Myanmar Years; A Diplomatic Account of India's Relations with the Region*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2016, p. 194.

adhere to for the national reconciliation to become a reality. They were spelt out by General Haling as :

1. Genuine desire to achieve eternal peace.
2. To adhere to the signed agreement.
3. Not to take advantage of the peace agreement.
4. Not to be a burden to the people.
5. Adhere to the existing current laws.
6. Adhere to the 2008 constitution and co-operate to drive for democracy.<sup>7</sup>

Another issue that had to be taken into account was the increasing communal dis-harmony that had surfaced in the Myanmar of today. In the case of the Rakhine State that borders Bangladesh, there was the presence of the Rohingya community a 800,000 strong Muslim group considered by Myanmar to be illegal Bengali migrants and as such having no citizenship rights. The Rohingyas were taken note of in earlier British recordings, where it was noticed that the influx of 'Chittagonians', would perhaps, result in original inhabitants of the Arakan being overtaken by them. However, nothing was done to prevent the setting of the Bengalis in this area of Myanmar and it had over a period of time resulted in strong communal feelings with the Buddhist Rakhines ensuring that they would not gain recognition as citizens of Myanmar.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 194-195.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 196-197.

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 inclusive political structure would be helpful for India's national security concerns. Through interdependent social and economic relations, India needed to make Myanmar more sensitive to our security requirements and neutralise Chinese influence in this region.<sup>9</sup>

India and Myanmar also enhanced co-operation in maritime security, particularly in combating piracy, terrorism, gun running and for security of respective island territories. This would require bilateral and multinational arrangements and training. India, being the largest nation in the region, can take the lead to extend assistance to Myanmar's naval and coast guard establishments. This would help check further expansion of Chinese maritime activities in the Bay of Bengal region.

Considering that the ASEAN countries were not very comfortable with the idea of enhanced co-operation in defence and security, due to the China factor, India and Myanmar could co-ordinate their approaches on the

---

<sup>9</sup> Malik, V.P., Reflections on Indo- Myanmar Relations, Scholar Warrior, New Delhi, Autumn, 2012, p. 11.

issue of co-operation in ASEAN (India has summit level relations), ASEAN Regional Forum, members of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM+), BIMSTEC and SAARC (Myanmar enjoys an observer status). India and Myanmar had signed agreements for co-operation between Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies and Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) and Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA). Both countries would get ample opportunities to enhance their views on strategic affairs. India also wanted to share its experience in strengthening democratic and multi-ethnic institutions in Myanmar, as India has done in Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup>

### **MYANMAR - INDIA STRATEGIC RELATIONS :**

As already mentioned, Myanmar was located at the tri-junction of East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. The strategic importance of Myanmar were :

- Myanmar had been the second largest of India's neighbours and the largest on the eastern flank.
- An unfriendly Myanmar hosting a foreign naval presence posed a threat to Indian security.
- Myanmar had an extensive border with China, which was in the north and contiguous with Sino-Indian disputed border, which had many implications and ramifications.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 11-12.

- India had both a land border (1,640 kms) and a maritime boundary with Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal. Four Indian States (Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram) border Myanmar and Kachin and Chin States and Sagging division.
- China can gain access to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar.
- In terms of insurgency in the Northeastern States of India, some of the insurgent groups had established camps in Myanmar and were operating from the Myanmar territory.
- There was also the issues of smuggling of arms (by both land and sea), drug trafficking and narco-terrorism and illegal immigration across the border from Myanmar.<sup>11</sup>

The future of the relationship would obviously be moulded by developments in the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR), ASEAN region and the sub-region in which Myanmar was located. The larger area stretching from India to Japan and Australia had witnessed significant changes in US - China equations in recent years. The spectacular growth in China's economy, military power, political influence, activism and assertiveness abroad, had compelled many nations to revisit their strategic calculations and policy assumptions. Each actor on the regional stage, including China and the US, claimed to promote security and development for all, but at the same time each suffered from insecurity, experiencing concern regarding

---

<sup>11</sup> Chattopadhyay, Shubhdeep., A Geo political Insight into Myanmar with Its Global Implications, Aakrosh, New Delhi, Vol. 16, Number 60, July 2013, p. 58.

others behaviour. Analysts would continue to interpret and monitor the action-reaction cycle of nations, big and small, in order to determine, if IPR would head towards an era of peace and prosperity or tension and cold war, or confrontation and conflict or a combination of all.<sup>12</sup>

Evolving India - China equations in Myanmar were also relevant here.<sup>13</sup> These scenarios, in turn, would impact on ASEAN, shaping not only, its future strength and solidarity, but also its ambitions project of community building and promoting integration of its newer members, the CLMV countries. The regional perspective thus, would continue to be highly relevant to whatever happened in Myanmar in the coming years. Its geo-political and geo-economic importance had long been clearly recognised by its immediate neighbours and also by other players in the region.

What happened in India in the politico - economic sphere, its approach towards its Northeast Region (NER), neighbourhood policy, Look/Act East Policy and Myanmar policy too should be taken into consideration. Parliamentary elections, held in mid-2014, brought in a new government that promised forward looking governance under a strong Prime Minister Narendra Modi. India's neighbourhood policy and Act East Policy received a major thrust with added emphasis on crafting a balance in India's relation with ASEAN, Japan, China and other regional powers.

---

<sup>12</sup> Bhatia, Rajiv., *India - Myanmar Relations - Changing Contours*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2016, pp. 215-216.

<sup>13</sup> Asha, Mary Mathew., *Myanmar : The New Strategic Pawn in Asia Pacific?*, *Air Power, Journal of Air Power and Space Studies*, New Delhi, Vol. 8. No. 4 (Winter, October- December), 2013.

Regarding its Myanmar policy, adequate national consensus had been built by now. Therefore, it was realistic to assume that the policy would continue. But how rigorously it would be executed, whether it would be backed by optional political will and ample financial muscle and whether it would entail the fullest possible engagement of the North East were valid questions. Answers to them, would be shaped by the leadership that the Modi government provided and the difference it would make in motivating the bureaucracy and India Inc. to engage Myanmar.

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.<sup>14</sup>

In the backdrop of improving political relations between the two countries, economic cooperation had also made significant progress. Economic interest also played a crucial role in developing India - Myanmar relationship. Myanmar was a bridge between India and Southeast Asian markets. Since 2000, Indian products particularly medicines had made their presence felt in the markets of Myanmar,

---

<sup>14</sup> Bhatia, Rajiv., *India-Myanmar Relations - Changing Countours*, Routledge Publication, New Delhi, 2016, p. 216.

bilateral trade increased from US \$ 273.23 million in 1997-1998 to US \$ 995.37 million in 2007-2008 and investment also increased.<sup>15</sup>

India was in a position to develop close political relationship with Myanmar, as long as the former recognised that-

- (a) China, like India, had legitimate reasons to craft close co-operation with Myanmar,
- (b) Myanmar would not choose between China and India, desiring friendly relations with both and
- (c) China-Myanmar bilateral co-operation would continue to outweigh India - Myanmar bilateral co-operation in the coming years.<sup>16</sup>

However, India shifted its policy on Myanmar after 1992 for four reasons. The growing triangular relationship between China, Pakistan and Myanmar concerned India, because the increasing strategic linkages between Myanmar and China were against India's interests, as China-Pakistan alliance on the Western front was a cause of concern for India. India government firmly believed that there were supplies of conventional weapons from Pakistan to Myanmar, the training of army personnel in

---

<sup>15</sup> Ratha, Keshab Chandra., and Mahapatra, Shushanta Kumar., India and Burma : Exploring New Vista of Relationship, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham University, Tamil Nadu, 2012, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Bhatia, Rajiv., K., Sakhuja, Vijay., Ranjan, Vikash., Change in Myanmar, Shipra Publications, New Delhi, 2014, p. 220.

Pakistan and China's support of arms and training to India's ethnic insurgents from Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur.<sup>17</sup>

Besides, the Indian state needed to consider "border trade" as a strategy for the development of the border areas. A "shared border" approach would lead to better border management, which was beneficial for the promotion of cross border trade. India needed to engage Myanmar more intensely and play more substantive role in the development of Myanmar. Border states in India needed to adopt corporate approach, as far as their development activities were concerned.<sup>18</sup>

Another factor of India policy shift concerns with its Northeast region. The mounting problem of insurgency, coupled with the menace of arm-trafficking in India's Northeast region, propelled India to change its approach from that of confrontation to a continuous engagement, with the SLORC government. Improved relationship with Myanmar was essential for India, as it was the land bridge between India's Northeast region and ASEAN countries. The development of the North East region was a very important political, economic and social issue for India. Tibet and Myanmar accounted for 98 percent of its borders with these four countries. Though the natural shortest and easiest access for the North East region of

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 71.

<sup>18</sup> Das, Gurudas., Bijoy, N., and Thmas C.J., Indo - Myanmar Border Trade, Aakashsha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2005, p. 32.

India to the rest of India was across Bangladesh, but Bangladesh did not give transit rights to India.<sup>19</sup>

As Bangladesh had not shown any willingness to co-operate with India, the only other outlet for the North - east region was through Myanmar. Therefore, Myanmar remained not only a area of security interest, but also for economic development of India's Northeast region. The government of India had adopted two most pragmatic policies, such as the 'Look East Policy' (LEP) and constructive engagement with Myanmar. Prime Minister P.V Narsimha Rao initiated the LEP, by which the India - Myanmar relations had come into focus. Rao reversed India's policies towards Myanmar and had put initiatives to rebuilt a viable relationship as Myanmar remained an area of security interest for India.<sup>20</sup>

With the visit of General Maung Aye, Myanmar's Vice-Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council in 2000, Myanmar strategic importance was further recognised. During this visit both countries discussed issues of common security concerns and identified a deep common interest in undertaking counter-insurgency operations in India's Northeast and decided to accelerate cooperation. India's Northeast along with Kashmir is arguably the most troublesome region of the Indian Union. The seven sister and one brother, as the Sikkimese call themselves, is the

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp. 72.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pp. 72-73.

zone of operation for 36 major and minor insurgent groups actively involved in creating insurgency, smuggling and what not.<sup>21</sup>

The increased momentum of bilateral visits and interactions was a positive contributing factor to strengthen close and friendly relations between Myanmar and India. These frequent exchanges of visit had proved as instruments to further develop and strengthen the multidimensional relationship in the area of security, trade and economic co-operation, as well as, in social interactions between the two countries.<sup>22</sup>

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. The second objective was to enhance mutual co-operation, in controlling the illegal trafficking of drugs from the golden triangle across sub - continental India to other parts of the world. Moreover, China's South east Asian policies had become a major factor, which had influenced India's policies towards the ASEAN region, especially towards Myanmar. China was developing communication networks in the Southeast Asian region, participating in several trans-Asian roads and railway projects in collaboration with Myanmar, Thailand,

---

<sup>21</sup> Ghosh, Amitav., *The Glass Palace*, Harper Collins Publishers, Noida, 2000, pp. 103-104.

<sup>22</sup> Bhatia, Rajiv, K., Sakhuja, Vijay., Ranjan, Viaksh., *Change in Myanmar*, Shipra Publications, New Delhi, 2014, p. 74.

Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam under the umbrella of the six-nation Greater Mekong Sub-Regional Cooperation arrangement. Therefore, India's regional foreign policy orientations necessarily involved sustaining, a relationship with Southeast Asian countries.<sup>23</sup>

## **FUTURE POSSIBILITIES OF BILATERAL RELATIONS**

### **BETWEEN MYANMAR - INDIA :**

A fundamental convergence existed between India's recognition of Myanmar's geo-strategic centrality and Myanmar's quest for an 'independent' fresh policy and a balance in its relations with neighbours and other major partners. Therefore, a whole set of factors that pushed the two countries towards a close and co-operative relationship would remain potent and unchanged, despite political changes that would occur in Myanmar, in the foreseeable future. Those in power in New Delhi and Naypyitaw were obliged to respect the realities and move towards building on the strong foundations, which had been laid in the past decade and half especially since 2011.

Looking ahead from this perspective, we may critically analyse the prospects concerning three major pillars of the relationship.<sup>24</sup> There were many uncertainties and some genuine concerns, but in looking at the Myanmar - China relationship, it was important not to overreact. As one noted Indian strategic analyst had written, "a degree of caution was

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pp. 74.

<sup>24</sup> Bhatia, Rajiv., India - Myanmar Relations - Changing Cantours, Routledge Publication, New Delhi, 2016, pp. 219-220.

warranted, but not undue alarm."<sup>25</sup> This view had been echoed by other regional specialists. It was always easy to develop dramatic and worrying scenarios for the future but, given the paucity of accurate information and the many different ways the current situation could develop in the future, these need to be treated with caution. All analysts studying this question, however, seemed to agree that the China - Myanmar relationship had developed a life of its own and given other strategic developments, may come to grow beyond the power of either country to control. This would impact unpredictable results for the Indian Ocean region. For example, the strengthening of economic and other sanctions against the military junta in Myanmar by the Bush Administration, in response to the imprisonment of Aung San Suu Kyi, may had some unintended results. Faced with these measures and the unprecedented criticisms by other regional countries, the Rangoon regime turned even more towards China for diplomatic and economic support.<sup>26</sup>

The embattled military government had also felt that it had no alternative, but to develop closer relations with fellow pariah States, like North Korea. For the primary consideration of the military regime in Rangoon was and would remain, the retention of political power and this would take precedence over any perceived impact on the wider strategic environment of the Indian Ocean region.

---

<sup>25</sup>Banerjee, Deepankar., Myanmar and Indian Security Concerns, Strategic Analysis, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 691-705.

<sup>26</sup> Rao, P.V., India and ASEAN Partners at summit, KW Publishers, New Delhi, 2008, pp. 380-381.

To improve relations between two countries in the near future, the following steps must be taken :

- The regions climatic and soil condition is suitable for growing variety of fruits and vegetables. Hence, stress must be given to develop agricultural and horticulture products on a commercial scale in the NE region of India.
- Since the region did not have much scope for development of heavy industries, emphasis must be given on home based processing units as well as cottage and small scale industries.
- Resource based and export oriented industries must be identified and efforts must be made to promote the setting up of such units for export marketing.
- More border trading points with adequate infrastructure facilities should be opened.
- To facilitate the easy flow of foreign tourist in the region, creation of air travel circuit between Singapore - Bangkok, Yangoon - Dhaka, Guwahati - Kathmandu is required. Early resumption of international flight from to other parts of NE and Guwahati is a must.
- Inland container transport facility needs to be introduced for smooth transportation of export and import consignments.
- A composite check gate at Moreh or Pallel in Manipur should be set up by removing existing multiple check gates.

- Clearing off the existing border dispute in order to win the trust of the ethnic minorities living in the vicinity. Intrusion from the Myanmar side and the Government of India's inability to provide a permanent solution has caused resentment among the population living in the border vicinities. The Government of India should look into the border dispute that erupts every now and then.
- Given the under development of the areas through which India tries to link economically with the rest of East and SEA nations, the centre has to understand the sentiments of the ethnic population living in the areas where the trilateral highway will eventually pass through.
- Likewise, the Government of Myanmar should also look into the issues of the ethnic communities with the approval of the local minorities.
- Illegal trade movement should be checked. Studies have found that illegal trading of commodities was estimated to be at Rs. 8.365 crore between India and Myanmar in 2000-01 through the Moreh-Tamu border towns.
- To curb illegal trading movement, the governments of both countries should systematically develop and increase import and export items; set up licensing offices accessible for traders and monitor the movement of illegal goods such as, arms and drug smuggling on both sides.

- Curbing insurgency issues that have hampered the development of the region, not through armed retaliation.
- Therefore, the governments of both countries should solve this issue patiently and meticulously through peaceful means and not through use of force as has been done in the past, which otherwise would dampen the development and growth of these projects.
- One important agreement made during the meeting between the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Myanmar President Thein Sein in 2012, was setting up cooperation between institutions from both countries which was seen as an important agreement because no such institution - based links has been witnessed earlier in both the countries.
- Cross - cultural assimilation is very important for any society to exist peacefully and progressively. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Myanmar and with the approval of the minorities, the leaders of the two countries discussed certain important matters, one of which was the importance of cultural contacts.
- Nonetheless, both countries have to carry forward their visions and goals looking into the sensitive ground realities, such as the ethnic minority issues, which often affect both sides.
- The developing situation in Myanmar also facilitates a lovely strategic field and India should act with certainty and a positive approach to enhance its strategic space and options. The scenario

ahead also offers a unique prospect for India to coordinate with others, especially USA and Japan to facilitate their engagement of Myanmar.

- India should leverage its established inroads in the Myanmar policy to form collaborative partnerships with new entrants and in turn maximise benefits.
- Banking infrastructure needs a drastic improvement. Border infrastructure has to be upgraded to international standards, particularly at Moreh - Tamu or Champai - Rih so that both countries can commence MFN trade at the border.
- Nevertheless, improvements in India - Myanmar connectivity can unleash a new dynamism in trade and production, especially in relatively backward areas of both India and Myanmar.
- The Indian diaspora in Myanmar can also play a crucial role in strengthening India - Myanmar ties.

\* \* \* \* \*