CHAPTER FIVE
TOWARDS NEIGHBOURS

Myanmar is one of the few countries in the world which has reserved her interest in what happens outside its border. This is often reflected in the country’s external relations policy. Perception of outside threat and interference to her national security, national reconstruction and sovereignty made Myanmar play isolationist and whimsical decision in external affairs. Historically Myanmar’s immediate neighbours were tormented by strong kings of Myanmar in different periods of history. Myanmar also suffered in the hands of the neighbouring kingdoms. Naturally the people of Myanmar had general fear and indifferent psychosis towards outside world. This was closely related to nationalism, xenophobia and insular habits.

From geographical standpoint also, Myanmar has favourable physical structure and geo-strategic position that has a lot to hide from the outside world. Myanmar is surrounded by mountains on three sides and by sea on the south which do not provide easy access to Myanmar. This was also true historically. Myanmar was situated in a vulnerable geo-strategic location between India and China and between contending cold war sphere of influence represented by Communist China and pro-western Thailand. During the heyday of cold war, Southeast Asian region became a hotspot of the global power politics with many countries of the region taking side either with the western bloc headed by United States of America or the eastern bloc under the erstwhile Soviet Union. Myanmar tended to look inward in the name of maintaining sovereignty and independent action. This is reflected in the foreign policy of the country as evolved, first as policy of neutralism and nonalignment under parliamentary democracy era of U Nu, second, as policy of isolation under Ne Win’s isolationist ideology and then the policy of opportunistic engagement with the world outside particularly since late 1988.

The parliamentary democracy of 1950s and 1960s practically avoided active international engagement in pursuance of non-aligned policy. The establishment of
military rule in March 1962 brought Myanmar’s external policy of non-alignment and neutralism into a strong xenophobic and paranoid nationalism, clearly aimed at reducing any foreign influence on Myanmar’s politics, economy and society. Only international engagements beneficial to military’s perceived ideology and interest were allowed. In response to the military regime’s monopoly of power and adverse human right records, many liberal democratic countries of the west imposed sanctions against Myanmar and ostracised the country.

In the meantime, global geo-political shifts occurred with the end of cold war in early 1990s following the disintegration of erstwhile Soviet Union. Geo-economics rather than geo-politics gained greater credence in the changed international environment. Economic integration and regionalism ushered in with globalisation as the thriving force. The crisis of 1988 necessitated shift in Myanmar’s internal politics and approaches to external countries. Consequently Myanmar made adjustment in response to changes in domestic and external environment. With western liberal democratic countries still following policy critical to the military’s ideology, Myanmar focussed to its immediate neighbours and region. While the western countries used sanction policy, neighbouring Asian governments followed a policy of ‘constructive engagement’. In doing so, they filled much of the international political and economic vacuum in Myanmar, giving the military leaders to pursue its self-proclaimed political road-map.

An analysis of Myanmar’s foreign policy, the status of Myanmar in the world community, the country’s government-to-government relationship and relation in international milieu, especially focussing its relationship with its three important neighbours namely China, Thailand and India can be undertaken. It will be conducted in three phases: period of neutrality and non-alignment of parliamentary democracy era, period of isolationism under Ne Win and the period of engagement aftermath 1988. Myanmar’s isolationism in external front is a necessary corollary of its domestic political setting. The retreat of the country from the world of nations was premised on fear, xenophobia, non-interference, national interest, sovereignty and development. Theoretically Myanmar claimed to have maintained regular relationship with all countries, but in practice Myanmar discouraged relationship between its
people and those of other countries, so much so that it was like closing the country from the outside world and the country acted like a hermit of Asia. Myanmar’s foreign policy and status in the international community was characterised by varying degrees of isolation in response to its internal political setting and global political scenario. International isolationism became a comfortable state of the isolationist political system under the military leaders to deny the attention or interference of the foreign powers as to what happen inside the borders of the country. From the military’s angle, international isolation was in pursuance of unique Myanmarese way to modernisation and nation-building. Under military rule, Myanmar opened to outside world only if would serve its highly self-righteous goals. How domestic political-economic changes did since 1988 have affected its external affairs policy is analysed.

**Myanmar in International Context**

One fact of the pre-colonial Myanmar was that the Burmans were generally indifferent towards foreigners. Historically Myanmar’s political and military ties with the outside world had feared the country. The Thais, the Manipuris, the Chinese and the Europeans provided ill-experience of dealing with outsiders. The Burmans never accepted the British presence in their country. They saw the British institutions and practices had undermined the Burman culture. Myanmar’s ill with the outsider strengthened during the World War II, when its ties with the British made it a Japanese target. The resulting oppression and destruction from the World War II left Myanmar even more apathetic to outsiders. Amidst such hatred and fear psychosis, Myanmar became independent in 1948, with new hopes and vigour. But the period coincided with the onset of cold war, where the world was divided into two rival camps headed by the United States on the one hand, and the erstwhile Soviet Union, on the other, and most of the lesser powerful states acting as satellite state of one or the other superpowers. Two traditional rivals, China, a communist country in the north, and Thailand, a pro-western ally to the east, were allegedly expressed sympathy for Myanmar’s anti-government rebels and insurgents in the border areas. Very differently from them, Indian, a non-aligned partner under the leadership of Prime Minister U Nu’s close friend Jawaharlal Nehru, had been emerging as a distinct force in the world. This situation was well commented by U Nu in 1950. U Nu presented
his country as “like a tender gourd among the cactus”. Back home, political divisiveness and ethnic disunity broke out into rebellion and the ever increasing economic deterioration greatly disrupted legitimacy of the government and stability of the country. In response to the challenges, the new country’s leaders adopted neutralism and non-alignment as the cornerstone of the foreign policy of the country. The policy of non-alignment implied that Myanmar accepted the principles of maintaining friendly relations with all countries of the world, especially with its neighbours. However it did not contemplated engaging too closely with any country of the world. Instead Myanmar preferred to take stands on international issues on its own understanding, independent decision and merit of the issue. It rejected economic aids and loans with string attached.

Myanmar adopting neutralism and non-alignment policy was shaped by factors, such as historical perceptions, geographical factors, economic consideration, influence of cultural and personality and domestic and global political milieu. The tradition of fear and despise of foreigners of the Myanmarese, influence of pious personality of U Nu, the memories of World War II, political rifts, political disunity and cold war rivalries combined in shaping foreign affairs policy of parliamentary democracy of U Nu.\^132\footnote{Silverstein (1977, p. 168) writes: “The leaders of this nation (Myanmar) that had just recovered its freedom after more than a century of division and colonial rule had to do everything possible to protect their state from conquest, dismemberment, and political domination by foreign powers. Neutralism, as it developed in Burma, served all those purposes well…” These were superimposed on Myanmar’s “traditional withdrawing and isolationist attitude and influence of personality of U Nu” (Bandyopadhyaya, 1983, p. 152), the first prime minister of independent Myanmar.} Myanmar decided it would be a neutral and non-aligned country in an effort to preserve its independence and sovereignty and to maintain friendly relations with all countries in the world. Myanmar joined the United Nations and it became a leading voice and founder-leader of the non-alignment movement. It organised the Bandung Conference of 1955 in Indonesia along with like-minded leaders, such as Nehru, Nasser, Tito and Sukarno. Myanmar also attended the first Non-Alignment Movement summit held in 1961 as the founder member of the movement. The foreign policy of Myanmar also sought a delicate balancing role between the United States and the erstwhile Soviet Union, and between India and
China. India served as a model for the non-alignment foreign policy and democratic political system. However the country never associated itself too closely with India or with China to the extent that it upset the other formidable neighbour, rather it acted as a neutral partner. Myanmar became the first non-communist country to recognise the new government of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. When it feared its neutral policy would cease if it had joined the British Commonwealth of Nations, it wisely declined to join the body of former British colonies. Myanmar wished to sever all ties with the outside world provided if it did not serve its interest, and if it proved against the principle of neutralism and non-alignment.

U Nu’s policy of non-alignment and neutralism was first tested in the Korean Crisis of 1950. Myanmar respected the United Nations stand of branding North Korea as aggressor to South Korea. However when the United Nations forces crossed the 38th parallel, Myanmar withdrew its support alleging that the United Nations had overstepped its original mandate. In several other international issues, such as Russian intervention in Hungary in 1956, Egypt crisis in 1956, Cuban crisis in 1961 etc Myanmar dissociated itself from toeing big power line. Myanmar became a member of the Colombo Plan, but it refused to join Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) founded in September 1954. Amidst hesitations, Myanmar received developmental aids from both the United States and the erstwhile Soviet Union during the period of parliamentary democracy because the country drastically needed them for the construction of its economy devastated by World War II. The government of U Nu tried to befriend with both India and China through his personal link with their respective leaders namely Nehru and Chou-en-Lai. In other words, throughout the parliamentary democracy period, Myanmar gained respect internationally by managing to live alongside large and powerful neighbours without compromising its independent foreign policy (Lintner, 1992). It existed as one of the most respected country in the region and its non-alignment was much appreciated by western chanceries. This was proved by the fact that Myanmar’s U Thant was appointed as Secretary-General of the United Nations for two terms.

The military overthrew the democratically elected government of U Nu by force in March 1962. Ne Win became the ruler of Myanmar for twenty-six years from
1962 to 1987. Under the military rule, the policy of non-alignment and neutralism was turned to become isolationism in external front or complete withdrawal from affairs of other countries disregarding their merits or loss considerations. Ne Win’s Revolutionary Council followed an ideology called the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ mixed with strong xenophobia and nationalistic policy and corollary to it, Myanmar withdrew from international community shunning most of the diplomatic ties established during U Nu era. General Ne Win criticised the West, feared China, despised India and suspicious Thailand and other countries. Contact with the outside world was kept to an absolute minimum. The military denied joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) when it was formed in 1967 and even stunningly left the Non-Alignment Movement in 1979 considering these organisations not neutral.

The Revolutionary Council of General Ne Win undertook several measures designed to get rid of foreign influences over Myanmar’s economy and society. All the property and business of the foreign nationals were nationalised and the foreigners were asked to leave Myanmar. The government announced that it preferred only government to government aid of bilateral and multi-lateral programmes (Holmes, 1967, p.189) and discontinued accepting aid from the American philanthropic organisations, the Ford and Asia Foundations and the Fulbright British Council programmes as the military considered it belittling to accept aid from private organisations (ibid.). Freedom of press was denied and the government also acted forcefully to curb propaganda and information activities of all foreign diplomatic missions (ibid.), thus denied people to deal directly with the outside world. Activities of the foreign diplomats were strictly monitored, even the government and party officials were not allowed to deal with foreign diplomats or delegates and speak to them without prior authorisation of the military junta. Government delegates or officials of the Burma Socialist Programme Party visiting foreign countries were required to spell out particulars of their activities and conversations on return to the authority failing which they were liable to be punished. The nationalisation programmes launched in February 1963 by the military government directly affected the Indians, the Chinese, the Anglo-Myanmarese and the Western communities, primarily engaged in trade and financial services. Most of them were force to flee the
country. The effort was indigenisation of the economy by placing the private foreign owned enterprises in the hands of the people of Myanmar.

Myanmar cut off most links with the outside world. Its economy operated in a very secluded and autarchic way and many foreign cultural institutions and practices were forbidden. The foreign affairs policy of the country increasingly became abstracted from the thought of the military junta due to preoccupation with the country’s own interest, survival and sovereignty. Officially embassies and consulates were stationed in few countries, but they were mostly formality or ornamental in the sense that they did very little to develop meaningful relations with the host countries. Under the isolationist ideology the junta restricted diplomatic activities to a bare minimum. It opted to follow a dogmatic bilateralism grounded on personal, high-level diplomacy in relation to other countries so that the crisis of diplomacy was overcome. Though General Ne Win made few official rather personal visits to Moscow, Peking and Washington, but few meaningful outcomes could be seen from the visits. For example, he visited the United States in September 1966 where he discussed some business affairs, military support for its anti-communist military campaign and ended in playing golf. There were no international ties in the true sense of the term.  

Under the leadership of Ne Win, Myanmar’s military government sank into deep isolation. At the same time, it had denied the economic benefits of engaging with other countries. Back home it pursued policy of extensive nationalisation but the military leaders lacked knowledge of managing economic affairs. Conversely the country gradually encountered economic recession. This paved the way for Myanmar’s inclination to international development assistance. The government entered into development programmes with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Asian Development Bank and the United Nations Development

---

133 The diplomatic vacuum was well commented by one-Rangoon (Yangon) based foreign envoy in 1988: ‘We had no meaningful contact with any element of the Burmese government. They had a designated group of foreign ministry types who could come to our dinners and talk about golf and tennis, the weather and what fruits were in season...during my first three months in Burma, my backhand improved immensely, and I even took up the game of golf; which I had thought was just a waste of time. But I had time to waste’ (quoted in Lintner 1992).
Programme, as well as accepted increased bilateral aids. In 1976, World Bank set up an aid consortium, including Britain, the United States, Japan, Germany, France, Australia and Canada for consultation and the establishment of a common policy regarding Myanmar (Charney, 2009, p. 145). The quasi-civilian military regime of Ne Win under the constitution of 1974 softened its state-controlled and autarchic economic policy. By mid 1980s, foreign aids and loans began to enter Myanmar. Japan, West Germany and later China became the main foreign aid donors. The People’s Republic of China emerged as a major source of loans to the country. However due to mismanagement, incompetence and corruption the inflow of foreign loans led to corresponding increase in long-term debt, producing a critical state of indebtedness by the mid 1980s. This together with internal political isolation and economic mismanagement produced socio-economic devastations forcing Myanmar to become one of the least developed countries in 1987. This shocked and shamed the people of Myanmar. Consequently it sparked as the 1988 protests attracting the greatest international interest into the country’s political and economic situations.

The brutal crackdown and suppression of the protest by the military junta was swiftly publicised in the international community and eventually democratic-minded countries imposed sanctions on Myanmar. Many western governments including Japan, non-governmental organisations and business bodies ended operations in Myanmar. The United States withdrew its ambassador from Myanmar. The United States, the European Union and many western countries imposed military, economic and political sanctions.\textsuperscript{134} Contrary to western governments, most of Myanmar’s neighbouring countries adopted policy of constructive engagement and as mentioned above, in doing so they occupied much of the vacuum created by international isolation of Myanmar. China had been a great supporter of the military regime in Myanmar. The country had normalised relationships with India from mid 1990s attracting India on security and development considerations. Thailand was attracted by the economic prospects which engagement with the resource rich Myanmar could provide to it.

\textsuperscript{134} It can be mentioned here that western countries were greatly lobbied by supporters of democracy in Myanmar to put immediate sanctions to Myanmar drawing the lesson from the end of apartheid in South Africa earlier 1990s.
Myanmar also made changes in its external relation positions. It practically gave up its strict isolationism and joined the regional groupings, such as the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS) in 1992, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1997 and Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Co-operation (ACPM-EC) in 2003. It joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995 obliging itself to progressively liberalise its foreign trade regime. Myanmar joining Association of Southeast Asian Nations had greatly enhanced the credibility of the legitimacy hungry military government, because the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, citing their doctrine of non-interference in the internal affairs of the member countries indirectly rallied to the defence of the military government of Myanmar. All these indicate the junta’s willingness to integrate with the world community, but still it was guided by the considerations of survival, legitimacy, expediency and national security. The military regime undoubtedly preferred no foreign attention and involvement in its affairs. For example in 2005, the ruling military government Stat Peace and Development Council shifted capital of the country from Yangon to a more reclusive region Naypyitaw where influence of outsiders would not be as profound as in the former capital Yangon. Similarly, after the devastation of the cyclone Nargis in 2008, Myanmar hesitated a lot before allowing humanitarian and relief aids to the affected people. It was allowed only after intense diplomatic pressures from the United Nations, China and India. Even then the aid agencies or countries were often obstructed by the military. Moreover, preference was given to neighbours over the western countries in executing relief and humanitarian works.

For the last five decades, Myanmar has followed a policy of isolation and opportunistic engagement. During the period of strict isolationism under Ne Win, Myanmar curtailed diplomatic relations with all the countries. It discouraged relationship between its people and those of other countries so much so that the country acted like a hermit. The military junta certainly not liked foreign attention and involvement in its role of modernisation and preservation of unity of the country. Later Myanmar needed aids and loans and external investments, but it did not prefer to abandon its policy of isolation all in all. The pro-democracy uprising of 1988 brought Myanmar under the radar of international attention. The democracy-minded
countries, such as the United States, France, Australia and Asian country-Japan and South Korea, and non-state bodies like European Union followed policy of sanction and isolation. The sanction policy in a way supplemented Myanmar’s policy of isolation. Myanmar junta’s poor human right record and denial of democracy invited western ostracism. The sudden international isolation and sanction policy hampered Myanmar’s economy and this prompted Myanmar’s open policy towards its immediate neighbours. The immediate neighbours of Myanmar have acted as a balancing act for the military junta. The sanction policy of the west largely proved counterproductive.

**Myanmar and China**

China is the most powerful and practically the closest among the neighbours of Myanmar. Historically Myanmar experienced memory of fear, distrust and entrenched relationship in relation to its northern neighbour. In different periods of history, China posed a threat to the security and sovereignty of the monarchical Myanmar. Many strong Chinese dynasties had intervened in Myanmar king’s affairs in different periods of history and caused considerable havoc. Mongol force of Kublai Khan sent armies from Yunnan in 13th century to subjugate the kingdom of Pagan and brought it to an end the first unified Burman kingdom developed by king Anawartha. The last king of the Pagan dynasty, king Narathitrpate, earned the nickname *Tarok Pye Min*, meaning ‘the king who ran away from the Chinese’ (Trager, 1966, p. 234). Chinese had also invaded Myanmar during the Chinese Qing dynasty of China. It was an important event in the history of Myanmar that when Chinese Qing king launched several mission to subdue the arrogant Myanmar king between 1765 and 1768, Chinese professional armies was utterly outfought and its viceroy was forced to sue for peace (Tinker, 1967, p. 338). When Myanmar was incorporated into British Indian Empire, China adopted a cautious attitude in dealing with Myanmar. However many Chinese were integrated as traders into Myanmar’s plural society under the colonialism.

Myanmar became an independent country in 1948. Next year China became a communist country under the leadership of Mao Zedong. Myanmar gave official
recognition to the communist country at a time it was rejected by the western powers. In fact Myanmar became the first non-communist country to give recognition to the People’s Republic of China (PRC). However, in a world divided by ideological and power competitions, Myanmar adopted a policy of non-alignment and neutrality, whereas China became a staunch proponent of international communism considering all countries beyond the socialist camps as imperialist or controlled by imperialist. Myanmar’s neutralism and non-alignment policy were looked with suspicion by Chinese authority. China believed, ‘whether in economic, military or political dimension Myanmar’s nature has not been changed; it is still a typical country’ even after its independence (Fan Hongwei, 2012, p. 15).

The Chinese government considered Myanmar as allegedly under political and economic influence of the western powers, such as the Great Britain and the United States. For instance, on 3 September 1952, when Chou-en-Lai visited Moscow and talk with Stalin, he stated that the Myanmarese government concealed its real position on China and it actually pursued the policy of anti-China following the Great Britain and the United States (ibid). In other words, during the period from 1948 to 1962, China was not at all excited by the idea of Myanmar being an independent country as the Chinese still considered Myanmar to be under foreign influence. Conversely Myanmar’s threat perception to its national security from China did not vanished even after independence. Myanmar feared Chinese sympathy for the communist rebels in Myanmar. The Chinese factor, in turn, influenced Myanmar in adopting a policy of non-alignment and neutrality in a world divided by power politics and cold war. In fact fear of antagonising China to a large extent shaped foreign affairs stand of Myanmar.

The first controversy in the Myanmar-China relations in the initial years of the independence was the issue of unauthorised occupation of Myanmar’s northern border by the remnants of the Chinese Nationalist or Kuomintang (KMT). When the civil war in Myanmar had ended with victory of communists under the leadership of Mao Zedong over the nationalist Chinese of Chaing-Kai-Sheik in 1949, a large number of armed forces loyal to Chaing-Kai-Sheik, the Kuomintang, entered Myanmar by crossing over Yunnan province and established base in the eastern part of the Shan
state. It was alleged that the unlawful Kuomintang forces were supported by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) by supplying money and arms and encouraged them to raid into communist China from Myanmar. The Myanmarese authority feared the development would turn Myanmar a theater of cold war due to Chinese and western interventions. The presence of Kuomintang forces within the borders of Myanmar had given China a pretext to invade Myanmar or interfere in its domestic affairs. The fear and suspicion of China was more aggravated by the presence of threat of Communist Party of Burma on the security, integrity and sovereignty of Myanmar because Myanmar had a feeling that being a communist country China would sympathize the communist rebels of Myanmar. The Chinese and communist rebel factors apart, intervention of the United States worried Myanmar. Myanmar acted very cautiously in dealing with the Kuomintang issue. In 1953 Myanmar asked the United States to cancel its aid programme to the Kuomintang remnants and took the question of illegal Chinese nationalist forces inside Myanmar to the United Nations (Choudhary, 2000, p. 424). Due to joint efforts of the United Nations and the Myanmarese authority many Kuomintang forces were repatriated to Taiwan, yet a large section of them settled down in the Shan state where they mixed with rebels of Myanmar and laid the foundation of multi-dollar illegal and opium trade.

The two countries established formal diplomatic ties early in 1950s. While Myanmar attempted to deliberately avoid antagonizing China, China, in response, adopted a dual strategy. On the one side, China pursued a policy of establishing good diplomatic relationship with the government of the Union of Myanmar by establishing diplomatic ties and exchanging official visits, on the other side, it sympathized Communist rebel in Myanmar soil. It can be mentioned here that immediately after independence Myanmar faced severe threat to its national security from the communist rebels and ethnic insurgents. During the turbulent years of internal revolts, China extended covert sympathy in cause of the revolting communist rebels in Myanmar by endorsing party-to-party relations between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the White Flag Communist Party of Burma led by Than Tun. The

135 During the height of Kuomintang issue in the Myanmar-China relation, India provided diplomatic support in favour of Myanmar both inside and outside the United Nations.
Chinese authority rendered psychological support and strategic advices to the communists rebels which were not liked by the Myanmarese authority.

The communist rebels with the support of the Chinese posed a serious threat to Myanmar’s national security.136 This factor greatly held back the growth of a close and warmth government-to-government relations between Myanmar and China. Nevertheless the bilateral relationship achieved significant milestone in 1954 when the Chinese Premier Chou-en-Lai visited Rangon in 1954, and with his Myanmarese counterpart U NU issued a joint statement declaring the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence’. These principles theoretically acted as the basis for the Myanmar-China relationship.137 The government-to-government ties were further strengthened when U NU paid back a visit to China latter in the year 1954. The more significant development in the bilateral relations came when the two governments affected an agreement on the historical issue of border settlement in 1960 which attempted to demarcate the international boundary between the two countries. The same year the two countries also signed a ‘treaty of friendship and mutual non-aggression’ which reinforced the treaty of 1954.138 According to the treaty, the two parties would not invade each other and refrain from any military alliance directed against the other party. In 1961, China’s People Liberation Army (PLA) and army of Myanmar launched joint operations against the Kuomintang forces operating between their borders.

During the parliamentary democracy era the relations between Myanmar and China was not close friendly. Myanmar was under the Chinese sphere of influence which the communist government of China attempted to strengthen to thwart western influence in the region. Myanmar on the other hand was cautious to maintain its national independence, security and freedom of action in dealing with china. China posed a potential threat to interfere in Myanmarese internal affairs due to presence of

---

136 The communist revolt in Myanmar and the Chinese Communist Party’s sympathy and support to it continued till late 1980s, though it underwent many ups and downs negatively affecting Sino-Myanmar relations.
137 The same year, China signed the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence’ with Myanmar’s another great neighbour India. The five principles was an extension of the Bandung spirit and these principles involved: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence.
138 The treaty was signed during the period of caretaker government in Myanmar which was formed under the leadership of General Ne Win.
Kuomintang forces inside Myanmar’s northern border. China also adopted a policy of export of ideology of communism or ideologically motivated foreign policy. Myanmar maintained policy of non-alignment and neutrality and showed friendly gestures based on the principle of peaceful co-existence. The country maintained policy of neutrality during the Sino-Tibet affairs of 1950 and refused to brand China an aggressor in Korean Crisis of 1951 in the United Nations meetings. China on the one hand continued diplomatic ties and on the other it continued to commiserate the communist rebels. The two-pronged policy of China continued to be a matter of serious concern throughout the parliamentary democracy period in the Myanmar-China relations. To China Myanmar’s non-alignment and neutralism was not genuine, but indecisive and unpredictable. As a result cordiality in the bilateral relations could not be established though officially the bilateral relations were theoretically grounded on the ideal principles of peaceful co-existence. Nevertheless China remained Myanmar’s biggest customer for rice, and there have been many cultural and other missions from China (Donnison, 1972, p. 234). The bilateral relationship was never allowed to remain quite.

There occurred great changes in the domestic politics of Myanmar and the ideology of state with the coming of the military regime in March 1962. The military had ended the parliamentary democracy era. It was a great relief for Communist China. It was not surprising that China got the distinction of being the first country which gave official recognition to the military government, only two days after the coup (Bandyopadhyaya, 1983, p. 167). In foreign affairs policy the military government of Ne win adopted an isolationist foreign policy reflecting Myanmar’s intention to prevent foreign intervention in its domestic affairs. Myanmar was inclined to completely dissociate itself from the affairs of other countries. For instance when Sino-Indian war broke out in November 1962 military government of Myanmar was wholly focussing on presenting its ideological guidelines for ruling which came out as the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’. The Chinese humiliation of India in the war had greatly enhanced China’s position and prestige among its neighbours and at the same time, it aroused a number of questions over non-alignment as foreign policy options.
Internally, the Revolutionary Council headed by General Ne Win had launched a number of policies clearly designed to reduce foreign influences in Myanmar. Under the ideology called the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ almost all private enterprises were nationalised which greatly reduced western or foreign domination in the economy of the country. The Myanmarese military established tight control over almost all aspects of the Myanmarese life; private press were censured and freedom of expression was denied. The movement of the people in and out of the country was restricted. There was complete isolation from the outside world implying minimization of ties with other countries whether politics, economy or cultural. Though diplomatic ties with few selective countries including China were continued, but contact was intentionally kept minimal. The policy of nationalisation also negatively affected Chinese entrepreneurs living in Myanmar. Among others, due to the nationalisation of private owned businesses two Chinese banks, namely the Bank of Communication and the Bank of China, were taken over by the military junta. It was intended to thwart Chinese influence in Myanmar, particularly in the economy. Suddenly China found its influence in Myanmar at stake, but since it was equally applied to all countries, not particularly to China, it thought to tolerate it. China offered the two banks as a gift from the Chinese people to Myanmar. The Myanmarese authority appreciated China’s friendly gesture, but still suspicious to the overture. To fill up the diplomatic vacuum and to provide continuity of relationship, Ne Win paid visit to China in July 1965 and a joint communiqué was issued reaffirming the 1961 treaty and the five principles of peaceful co-existence.

The Chinese difficulty to adjust to the changing position in its bilateral relationship with Myanmar following isolationist policy of Ne Win came out soon. While Myanmar was increasingly focussing on its domestic affairs under the ideology of the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ keeping it out of superpower rivalries or threat from the neighbours, China was attempting to restore its sphere of influence in the country. It continued to foment communist insurgency in Myanmar by supporting the rebels with moral and material supports. In doing so China intended to keep its significance or influence on Myanmar alive. In fact it was the only option left with China at a time the military government of Myanmar preferred to isolate itself from anything they considered foreign or alien. For the Chinese government the only
leverage it could apply against China was through inciting communist’s rebel activities. The military junta of Myanmar considered such Chinese manoeuvre a ‘dirty game’. In fact throughout Ne Win era the mistrust over the communist rebel issue and Chinese sympathy negatively affected the smooth growth of bilateral relation between Myanmar and China. China was certainly not happy with the developments in Myanmar. Myanmar’s policy of isolationism steered China accumulated dissatisfaction, which, in turn, gradually deteriorated the relation between the two countries in mid-1960s. The military junta’s ban of all publications of all privately owned foreign language newspapers including the Chinese owned, the New China News Agency (NCNA) in December 1965 further curbed Chinese influence in the country. The growing anxiety of the communists China was strengthened when General Ne Win paid a visit to the United States in 1966. Disgusted China increased its sympathy and support including psychological and material to the communist rebels in Myanmar. China’s policy of ‘exporting ideology’ further strengthened during the period of Cultural Revolution in China. Such hostile policy of China led to offshoot anti-Chinese sentiments in Myanmar. Consequently there occurred the worst event in the Myanmar-China relations in the form of anti-Chinese riots in Rangoon where Chinese community in Rangoon was targeted. The anti-China riot of 1967 was a spontaneous explosion of anti-Chinese feelings accumulated to the heart of the people of Myanmar. Chinese shops and home in the city were destroyed, many Chinese residents were killed and a mob even attacked the Chinese embassy in Rangoon. The racial outburst was brought under control by the military government of Ne Win but the ill feeling remained unabated. Immediately, both the countries withdrew ambassadors from both capitals. Beijing suspended its aid programmes to Myanmar granted under the 1960 friendship treaty. Myanmar, on the other hand, further isolated itself and minimise its ties from China. It even prohibited teaching of Chinese language in schools and other places. In March 1969 Myanmar terminated the treaty of friendship and mutual non-aggression signed before. China on the other

139 China’s sympathy for the communist rebels was clearly evident when a letter sent by the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) was broadcasted in Peking Radio. The broadcasting was quickly responded by Myanmar in its government controlled newspaper as follows: “The Red Chinese broadcast of a message sent from the illegal organization in Burma is most unjustified. A matter of this kind, which could bring about a situation calling for termination of diplomatic relations between two countries, should not be taken with complacency. It is therefore desirable that Red China give up its dirty game of fire in one hand and water in the other” (quoted in Holmes, 1967, p. 195).
hand openly extended support to the Communist Party of Burma and provided with it weapons, training, advices and logistic etc. (Fan Hongwai, 2012, p. 12). China also facilitated them to recruit Chinese ethnic minority people living in the Chinese side of the border to serve with the insurgents in Myanmar. The Sino-Myanmar relationship at this juncture was at its lowest point.

In the beginning of 1970s Sino-Myanmar rapprochement could be seen. China had moderated the ideological tinge it had been giving to its foreign policy and consequently it softened its support for the communist rebels in Myanmar. Myanmar also made certain adjustment to its outlook towards China and outside world in view of the deteriorating economy in pursuance of isolationist policy. The rapprochement was obvious when diplomatic ties were restarted in early 1970s. In November 1970, Myanmarese ambassador returned to China which was reciprocated by China by resending its ambassador to Rangoon in March 1972 (Bert, 1975, p. 476). Another major breakthrough in the Sino-Myanmar friendship occurred when Ne Win visited China in August 1971, which was warmly welcomed by premier Chou-en-Lai (ibid. p. 477). The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the coming of Deng Xiaoping in power in 1978 further strengthened the improving ties between the two countries. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, dramatic changes in policy of China were initiated with characteristic shift from ideology-based foreign policy under Mao to pragmatic and realistic approach in dealing with external affairs. Most importantly China asked the Communist Party of Burma to be ‘self-reliant’ implying that it would no longer support as it did in the past (Banerjee, 1996, p. 695). Myanmar also found many economic complementary in strengthening ties with new China in view of the country’s economic deterioration due to the autarchic economic policy it had been following since early 1960s.

In 1988 the long political and economic dissatisfaction of the people of Myanmar erupted into a popular movement demanding a more open political and economic system. The movement was violently suppressed by the military, but the

---

140 Fan Hongwai (2012, pp. 12-13) quotes CIA’s declassified document: “...the [assistance] the Chinese are providing the insurgents-as of April 1971-includes, in addition to the weapons...ammunitions, explosives, tools, clothing and uniforms, medicines, food grains, printed propaganda (including Mao Badge) and extra funds (in Burmese currency).
crisis badly affected military regime’s external image, prestige and legitimacy. Through a military coup, State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) established a direct military rule. Myanmar was passing through a phase of external criticism and ostracism. With boycotts and sanctions poured against the military regime from many western liberal democratic countries including Japan and India, Myanmar became a pariah state. At this critical juncture of international ostracism, China openly showed its solidarity to the new military regime. In 1989 China also faced western ostracism and sanctions following the Tiananmen accident. This brought the two countries even more closely. The single most important obstacle in the growth of cordial relation between Myanmar and China, that is, China’s overt and covert support for the Communist Party of Burma had ended under Deng Xiaoping following which the communist rebels collapsed. By 1990 there were great shifts in both the countries. The economic policy of Deng Xiaoping and the State Law and Order Restoration Council found to be complementary. Both the country had become global pariahs after the brutal suppress of popular protests of 1988 in Myanmar and 1989 in China. There developed a sense of identification which was gradually translated into strategic partnership covering economic, political, military and developmental co-operations. In October 1989, the then Vice-Chairman of the State Law and Order Restoration Council Gen Than Shwe and his colleague Khin Nyunt, visited China and laid foundations of the current partnership between the two countries. The need for great power support for the military junta of Myanmar against western sanctions and interventions for alleged violation of human rights was ensured by China which enjoys right to veto in the United Nation Security Council. The military regime had greatly strengthened its internal position in Myanmar with Chinese support including arms transfer and economic aids. The Myanmarese military regime’s external legitimacy was also enhanced with Chinese diplomatic supports in international forums. Conversely China gained strategic foothold and dramatic increase of its influence on Myanmar. The isolationist and inward-looking Myanmar gradually became a close ally of China, rather a satellite or client state of China.

141 The Tiananmen accident of 1989 is also known as the June Fourth Incident in Chinese history. This accident relates to a bloody military operation of the Chinese army over the democratic protests in Peking’s (Beijing) Tiananmen Square. The military killed several hundred civilians in the crackdown. 142 The Communist Party of Burma having lost Chinese backing, split and collapsed completely in 1989.
Burma was suspicious of the Chinese long-term strategic intentions, but still it interested in establishing good working relationship with China. To neutralise the jeopardy of relying too heavily on China, Burma diversified its source of diplomatic support by developing friendly relations with India, Thailand and other countries willing to engage with it by luring economic benefits and projecting its rich natural resources. For instance, when Burma felt the Sino-Burma partnership grew unbalanced with China getting an overwhelming influence in Burma, it sought to counter China’s influence by establishing ties with India and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and also drawing herself into some regional organisations. Since the mid-1990s Myanmar has achieved a position to find in both Beijing and New Delhi all the interest of the regime including military support, exploitation of the country’s resources and if the case arose, checkmate the regional influence of the other rival’s (Egreteau, 2008, pp. 38-72). In the last two decades, Myanmar-China relations occupied a strategic height encompassing political, economic and military to people to people contacts and cultural ties. China was a reliable friend of Myanmar in international forums. For example, Myanmar survived a UN Security Council vote through support for China and Russia which were the junta’s backers in the UN body (Wilson and Skidmore, 2008, p. 1). However recently, China has shown trends of altering its stance and support to the Myanmarese junta. For instances, on 11 October 2007 in the UN Security Council meeting held during the 2007 Saffron Revolution in Myanmar, China in a rare occasion criticised the Myanmarese military for the first time in the post 1990s. It expressed strong disapproval in the military junta using force on the demonstrators and demanded release of political prisoners. In fact China is preparing to accommodate itself politically and economically within the domestic reforms taking place inside Myanmar keeping in view its long term interests.

Myanmar and India

Next to China, India is the most formidable neighbour of Myanmar which is located in its north western direction. Besides geographical proximity, the two countries are linked by history, culture and economic ties. Two India religions,

143 China and Russia claimed that the problems in Myanmar are the country’s internal affairs and did not constitute a threat to regional or global peace and security.
Buddhism and Hinduism, flourished in Myanmar, though it is only Buddhism that flourishes and survives at present in Myanmar. The kings of present Manipur state of India fought several wars with the Myanmarese kings and also established matrimonial alliance between them. However, the Indian contact and influence in the various sphere of the Myanmarese life was never expansionist in character, but dominated by the consideration of trade and commercial interests and cultural contact (Pakem, 1992, p. 4). It was in the process that the Myanmarese people found many aspects of the Indian life appealing to them. The British had brought the two countries under one political and administrative set up until 1937. During this period, the Myanmarese found a number of Indians in Myanmar so much so that there was no department in the public services-police, military or civil-without Indians. Till the end of the World War II, Indian traders, professionals, administrators, lawyers, doctors etc. had followed the British to work in Myanmar. Such overwhelming presence of the foreigners, mostly Indians, in Myanmar was, however, not liked by the Myanmarese nationalists, who considered them as instrument of colonial exploitation. When the British left Myanmar, there were some 300,000-400,000 Indians living in independent Myanmar (Chakraborti, 2011, p. 301). The two countries were bifurcated as separate British colony in 1937, yet the leader of the two countries established mutual understanding and supported each other’s national movement against the British colonialism. Aung San, U Nu and other Myanmarese nationalist were influenced by the Gandhi led Indian national movement. Jawaharlal Nehru established close personal relationship with both Aung San and U Nu in the pre-independence period which, in turn, provided the basis for friendly relations between the two countries during the parliamentary democracy era in Myanmar. Few years after the World War II, Myanmar and India got independence. India got independence on 15 August 1947. Myanmar became an independent country about five months later on 4 January 1948 but through in different ways.\footnote{India got independence primarily through a non-violent way of struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi whereas Myanmar’s anti-colonial movement was predominantly militaristic movement for nation’s independence led by Thakin leaders of Dobama creed.}

The independence Myanmar and India more or less faced similar problems of nation-building and modernisation immediately after independence. Both the countries experimented democracy as form of government in a relatively challenging
socio-economic environment and amidst political immaturity of the people. They needed external aid and assistance for development, and at the same time, the two countries did not want to entangle into unwanted power politics of the cold war because it was against their national interest and development priorities. This understanding in the backdrop of cold war led U Nu and Jawaharlal Nehru along with other Afro-Asian leaders work very closely to propound policy of non-alignment in the 1950s. The mutual understanding and commonality between the leaders of the two countries guided them to establish friendly ties. However, unlike India, the Myanmarese non-alignment also implied neutrality which was directed not only between the two superpowers and but also between India and China, the two great neighbour of Myanmar. Myanmar skilfully maintained friendly relationship with both China and India during this period. The experiment of democracy in Myanmar between 1948 and 1962 was never smooth. Several factors such as growing ethnic and communist insurgencies, political rivalries, factionalism, corruption and lack of development never allowed democracy to take root in Myanmar. Being a close neighbour and a non-aligned partner, India, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, extended material and diplomatic support to Myanmar during turbulent period of under parliamentary democracy. For instance, during the critical years of communist and ethnic armed insurrections the government of Jawaharlal Nehru supported counter-insurgency campaigns of the Myanmarese military by providing arms and ammunitions. This Indian support when U Nu’s government had controlled little more that the capital Rangoon was much appreciated by U Nu’s government. India also extended diplomatic support in favour of Myanmar during the Kuomintang issues in Myanmar in both inside and outside the United Nations which was much appreciated by Myanmar without reservations. India’s representative in the United Nations V.K Menon expressed his delegation’s deep concern over the matter on April 1953 by saying that: “India felt that any violation of the honour of Myanmar or any wrong done to that country was as significant to it as wrong done to India” (cited in Pakem, 1992, p. 38). Again, on 5 November 1953, in a United Nations debate on Myanmar’s complaint against the presence of Chinese national troops on Myanmarese territory, he warned: “What hurts Myanmar hurts India because of the links of friendship, geography and history between the two countries” (ibid.). India’s national interest and ideological commitment to anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism and world peace
motivated India to think that Myanmar should not be under the influence of any power.

The most significant development towards building cordial ties between the two countries during parliamentary democracy era of U Nu in 1950s and 1960s was the signing of a ‘Treaty of Friendship’ on 7 July 1951 in New Delhi. The treaty was initially signed for five years, but it continued beyond that for the establishment of everlasting peace and unalterable friendship between the two countries based on the recognition and respect of the independence and rights of each other (ibid.). This treaty was warmly hailed by both the government and press of the two countries. Such smooth and cordial relation between Myanmar and India was built around the personal affection and respect between the leaders of the two countries particularly, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India and his counterpart U Nu of Myanmar. The commonality of political and economic system of the two countries, such as parliamentary democracy and mixed economy as the basis of political and economic development in both the countries helped to strengthen their bilateral relations. The growing partnership was further strengthened by co-operation in economic and social fields. In early 1949, India took a prominent role in promoting a Commonwealth loan of 6 million euro to Myanmar to which India contributed 1 million euro (ibid. p, 55). A commercial agreement which was predominantly a rice trade agreement was signed on 29 September 1951. It anticipated largely rice trade in the form of export of rice from Myanmar to India in exchange of finished products such as gunny bags, cotton yarn, iron and steel products etc. as the main components (ibid.). India extended a loan of approximately 40 million dollar to Myanmar in 1956-57 and it also supported Myanmar in its boundary agreement with China (Trager, 1966, p. 258).

There also existed two notable frictions in the bilateral relation during the U Nu era. The government of U Nu’s nationalisation policy caused some misunderstanding. This was because the policy deprived a considerable numbers of Indian of their land, particularly the chettyar community was affected. Nehru took the issue with the Myanmarese authority. India expressed that it was not against nationalisation, rather supported as it being Myanmar’s internal affair, but it welcomed only a non-discriminatory act. India intended to ensure that adequate
compensation be given to those affected Indians. The question of rice trading and debt settlement also caused some misunderstanding towards one another. It was later agreed that Myanmar would be given high price for its rice export, but a portion of the price would be deducted in payment of Myanmar’s separation debt. It brought some compromises but new point of differences, such as inclusion of inferior rice among the shipments to India and exclusion of foreigners from the import-export trade, which mostly affected the Indian traders continued to hamper amicable bridge of the misunderstanding (Tinker, 1967, pp. 355-56). The Myanmarese military regime under Ne Win, which overthrew U Nu’s regime, more vigorously professed the policy of nationalisation and anti-foreigners.

In the initial years of 1960s, Myanmar moved more closely to China. Myanmar and China signed a border agreement and mutual non-aggression pact in 1960. Around this time, Sino-Indian war of October-November 1962 broke out where India’s prestige was badly shattered. Myanmar cautiously adopted a neutral stand on the issue, but the silence of Myanmar was interpreted as ‘pro-Chinese’ by India (Thin Thin Aung & Soe Myint, 2001, p. 91). Consequently the warmth in the Indo-Myanmar relations was distressed. General Ne Win twisted Myanmar as a self-imposed isolationist country. It vigorously followed xenophobic and inward-looking policies which were designed to reduce foreign influences in the country. One such policy was extensive nationalisation of the economy of Myanmar. The policy of nationalisation was not particularly directed against the Indians, but the Indian community were affected most by the nationalisation measures. Nationalisation of wholesale and retail trade businesses thrown a large number of Indian in the country out of business. The complained that no compensations were given and even the Indians along with other foreigners were asked to leave Myanmar. Around 1,00,000 Indians were said to have left Myanmar by September 1964 leaving all their belongings. The Indian community in Myanmar requested India for help. Indian Foreign Mister Swaran Singh met with General Ne Win to discuss the situation and in the meeting, Ne Win maintained that ‘his government was pursuing domestic goals based on a socialism that was not discriminatory against foreigners, but applied equally to all’ (Holmes, 1967, p. 192). It was concluded that the nationalisation measures were internal affair of Myanmar and hence, India would not protested it
(Silverstein, 1977, p. 182). The two parties also agreed that the foreigners desiring to reside in Myanmar ‘must merge themselves with the common people in building a socialist economy’ (Holmes, 1967, p. 192). India distanced itself from the military’s internal affairs. However mutual ill-feeling and misunderstanding remained. Meanwhile there was also deterioration in Myanmar-China relations over the Myanmar’s policy of expelling Chinese nationalists from Myanmar and China’s extensive support to communist rebels in Myanmar in response. The relations were at its lowest point following the anti-Chinese riot in Rangoon in 1967. Though Indo-Myanmar relations had not yet bridged the mutual misunderstandings, Myanmar became closer to India. Chinese policy of interference in Myanmar’s internal affairs and extending support to the rebels soured Sino-Myanmar relations. In order to exploit the opportunity provided by the emerging situation, Indira Gandhi and Ne Win the contemporary leaders of the two countries, exchanged visits. General Ne Win paid three visits to India during this period and Mrs Gandhi visited Rangoon in March 1969 (Thin Thin Aung & Soe Myint, 2001, p. 91). The two leaders discussed the Chinese threat to the two countries and decided to work closer. Under the realistic and pragmatic tinge of India’s foreign policy under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi greater understanding and cordiality developed with many official exchanges and visits supplementing them.

Further development of cordiality in the bilateral relations between Myanmar and India got setback due to internal political crisis in India in mid 1970s. India shifted its focus to internal political crises. The domestic political crises were stabilised in the beginning of 1980s, Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi visited Myanmar in December 1987 to renovate Indo-Myanmar relations. The two countries signed Land Boundary Agreement and the Maritime Boundary Agreement in 1967 and 1986 respectively. Notwithstanding the official visits and exchanges conducted between Myanmar and India during the isolationist phase of Myanmar’s foreign policy under Ne Win, the relations between the two countries in the said period was largely casual with no enthusiasm to make them pragmatically significant on the part of military junta of Myanmar. Relations were pushed forward by Myanmar only to fill

---

145 The decade of 1970s was a period of great political instability in Myanmar. The legitimacy of the Indira Gandhi’s Congress government was challenged and later, it was pulled down by Janata party in 1977. However, the return of congress dominance back in 1980 brought India back on track.
the diplomatic vacuum of the policy of isolationism. After 1974 until mid-1990s, Indo-Myanmar relationship was characterised by low priority and passivity. The aloofness and segregation was strengthened after the deposed Prime minister of Myanmar, U Nu, who requested political asylum in India, was allowed to stay in India from 1974 to 1980 because of the personal friendship that existed between U Nu and Nehru’s family. The border problems in the form of insurgents in north-east India, particularly the Naga and Mizo also contributed to India’s detachment from Myanmar. It may be mentioned here that both the Nagas and the Mizos have been living on both sides of the borders of the two counties for centuries. In order to tackle the menace of insurgency, the two countries agreed to seal their respective borders causing the usual free movement of the tribal people on either side of the border restricted (Pakem, 1992, p. 196). The result was that Indo-Myanmar detachment deepened. In 1979 Myanmar even distanced itself from Non-Alignment Movement which was a coordinating factor in the foreign policy of the two countries since the time of independence. There was gradual downturn in the bilateral relation of Myanmar and China. On the other hand, during this period Indo-Myanmar isolationism, China strengthened greater strategic foothold in Myanmar, which was further facilitated by termination of dual track Chinese policy toward Myanmar. The new leadership after Mao had greatly softened the ideological and material support it had been rendering to the Communist Party of Burma. China-Myanmar relation in the post-Mao period found many mutuality or complementary in the bilateral relations and consequently, their bilateral relations grew stronger.

The lowest point in the Indo-Myanmar relation came in 1988. Ne Win’s isolationist regime faced the largest outburst of protests demanding restoration of democracy and respect for human rights in Myanmar. India still idealistic and as great apostle of democracy and peace in the world extended moral support to the pro-democracy upsurge in Myanmar. In fact India was the first neighbouring country to set firmly on the side of the democracy activists when the uprising took place in Myanmar (Chakraborti, 2011, p. 302). Criticizing military junta’s insensitivity to people’s aspirations, India unlike China, adopted a policy of diplomatic isolation and condemnation by showing solidarity with the Myanmarese movement for democracy. In addition to the official diplomatic position condemning the junta and demanding a
return to democracy, India openly supported the Myanmarese democratic activists and students. The Indian Embassy in Rangoon was active in helping pro-democracy activists and officials were in contact with opposition groups like the All Myanmar Federation of Student’s Union (ABFSU) and leaders like U Nu during the uprising (ibid.). All India Radio’s Burma Service launched a programme called ‘Voice of Burmese People’ from September 1989 to express solidarity with the forces of democracy (Steinberg, 1990, p. 598). Refugee camps were established for the Myanmarese democracy activists who fled into the Indo-Myanmar borders in Manipur and Mizoram state of India. India’s critical stand on the domestic political changes in Myanmar continued even in early 1990s. Myanmar conducted a multi-party general election in May 1990 where Aung San Suu Kyi’s party National League for Democracy registered a landslide electoral victory. The military junta however refused to hand over power, rather it unleashed military clam-down over the protestors. At this juncture, India supported a United Nations resolution which condemned the Myanmarese military junta for its violation of human rights and for refusing to acknowledge people’s verdict. India’s position in these internal political developments in Myanmar certainly troubled the new military junta the State Law and Order Restoration Council.

The junta considered the developments as internal affairs of the country and criticised India for interfering in the internal affairs of the country. India soon found its bilateral relationship with Myanmar freezing and New Delhi itself lost out to China and Thailand. India began to know the needs of establishing cordial relationship with Myanmar disrespecting the nature of regime in the country. India’s policy-makers were worried about the activities of the insurgent groups in its north-eastern region and their use of Myanmarese territory as a safe heaven, problem of small arm proliferation, drug trafficking and HIV/AIDS problem, all having a cross border dimension. All these consideration brought about a noticeable change in India’s

---

146It was alleged that India’s consideration of national interest and security prompted her to support the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar. According to Langpoklakpam (2006, p.212) India assumed that a democratic regime in Myanmar would be more sympathetic to its internal security interests. Certainly there was consideration of national interest behind the policy of supporting movement for democracy in Myanmar. However India’s love and respect for democracy also had great role to play in its sympathetic support for democracy in Myanmar.
approach towards the military government. Consequently starting from mid 1990s, India’s policy underwent a dramatic shift. The Prime Minister of India, P.V. Narasimha Rao affected the course correction by following an official “Look East Policy”. The policy was carried on by successive government. It was greatly augmented by Atal Bihari Bhajpayee led coalition government and the government led by Dr. Manmohan Singh.

The Finance Secretary of India, J.N Dixit paid an official visit in Rangoon in March 1993, which marked a turning point in the Indo-Myanmar relations as India decided from thereon to cautiously engage the Myanmarese military regime dropping its isolating policy. This implied that India considered the democracy movement in Myanmar and the issue of Aung San Suu Kyi as internal affair of the country. It was also a time of Rangoon wished to counter its over-dependency on China by diversifying its relations with outside world, particularly with other neighbours of the country and therefore, India’s policy-shift was welcomed thus paved the way for a new Indo-Myanmar strategic partnership. A number of high level ministers and official of both countries exchanges visits with intervals. The renewed Indo-Myanmar relation was evident in 1995 when armies of the two countries decided to conduct a joint military operation called ‘Golden Bird’ directed against insurgent groups in northeast India having camps in Myanmar side of the Indo-Myanmar borders, such as United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM&K), People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur, Manipur People’s Liberation Front (MPLF), Kuki National Army (KNA) and others. However the improving relations got some setbacks when India granted the Nehru Prize for International Understanding to Aung San Suu Kyi in 1995 in recognition of her commitment to democracy. The Myanmarese military government hurriedly suspended the joint military operation after the announcement of the award.

Though Myanmar never wanted it to be entirely under the influence of China, yet Myanmar was becoming increasingly dependent on Beijing. There was an apprehension that China was slowly turning Myanmar into another Tibet. China had vastly improved and militarised Myanmarese port facilities in the Bay of Bengal at Akyab (Sittwe), Kyaukpyu and Mergui, constructed a major naval base on Hyangjie
Island and communication facilities at Coco Islands in the Bay of Bengal which is a mere 45 km from Indian territory (Kolas, 2007, p. 635). According to some analysts, it also has signal intelligence (SIGNIT) modes capable of monitoring Indian naval and missile launch facilities in the Andaman and Nicober Islands, movement of Indian navy and other navies throughout the eastern Indian Ocean (ibid.). There was China-India strategic competition. India seeks to counter the growing Chinese influence in Myanmar. Myanmar also desires India to be a counter-balance to growing Chinese influence. In spite of this, China continued to be, in the eye of Myanmarese military regime, a higher priority than India as it enjoyed veto power at the UN Security Council which provided the only guarantee against possible UN offensive. Besides, geographical constraints also hindered growth of Indo-Myanmar economic and trade relation.

In addition to the political and strategic rapprochement, India’s trade and economic relation with Myanmar have gradually increased since mid 1990s. The initial step was made in January 1994 when India and Myanmar formalised border trade between them by signing a Border Trade Agreement in New Delhi. Implemented since April 1995, the border trading activities is in operation presently covering 62 trading items with Moreh in Manipur (India) and Tamu in Sagaing Division (Myanmar) as the nodal trading points. India’s trade with Myanmar during the year 2009-2010 was estimated about 1497.77 US dollars which is an amount more than 20 times than the year 1991-1992. However, balance of trade, except in the initial years, has been tilted in favour of Myanmar. India is Myanmar’s 4th largest trading partner and the second largest export market after Thailand absorbing 25% of its total export. India is also 7th most important source of Myanmar’s import. In terms of infrastructure co-operation, on 21 February 2001 India and Myanmar had inaugurated a major 160km Tamu-Kalemyo-Kalewa Road popularly called as Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road that aims to provide a major strategic and commercial transport route connecting North eastern region with Mandalay. Kaladan River Multi-Model Project intended to link India’s state of Mizoram to Sittweport in Myanmar though Bay of Bengal is also set for implementation.
General Than Shwe, who did not travel very often outside his country, paid a five-day visit to India in 2010. Than Shwe last visit India on October 2004 for five days. India, a nation with proud democratic tradition and credential had extended a red-carpet reception to a dogged dictator on his second visit in 6 years. The visit was significant for both the countries. A joint statement was issued in New Delhi on 27 July 2010 that reflected basically security and trade promotion concerns. For the ruling State Peace and Development Council junta of Myanmar, the red-carpet rolled out to Thant Shwe mattered much, but for the ideologue and supporters of democracy in Myanmar, India’s attitude, mild spoke out for a peaceful democratic transition in Myanmar not to the extent of threatening bilateral ties, was certainly not a moral boaster for democratic forces inside and outside Myanmar. The general’s visit ensured support or silence of India which has a credible position in the region as well as in global politics today.

Amidst such developments in the Indo-Myanmar relations, there occurred the significant political developments in Myanmar. A multi-party democratic election was held in 2010 and a civilian government was installed with Thein Sein as the prime minister in 2011. Though military continued to be the dominant force in the national affairs of Myanmar, Myanmar returned to a democracy to a large extent. Now the country seems to look to democratic India as its ideal partner than to China whose attitudes of dominance had fed up Myanmar. At this juncture Prime Minister Manmohan Singh undertook a three-day visit to Myanmar on 27 May 2012, the first such visit by an Indian Prime Minister in 25 years. During the visit, Singh met the new civilian leadership of the post-2010 elections in the new capital, Naypyitaw, and pro-democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in the old capital, Yangon. During the visit of Mr. Singh, India and Myanmar signed 12 MoUs (Memorandums of Understanding) with development and connectivity as matters of mutual concern (Table 12).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 12: Memorandums of Understanding/Agreements Signed between India and Myanmar on 28 May 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memorandum of Understanding regarding US$ 500 million Line of Credit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airline Services Agreement between India and Myanmar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indo-Myanmar Border Area Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of Joint Trade and Investment Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of the Advance Centre for Agriculture Research and Education (ACARE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of Rice Bio Park at the Department of Agricultural Research in Naypyitaw</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Setting up Myanmar Institute of Information Technology

Cooperation between Dagon University and Calcutta University

Cooperation between Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies and Indian Council of World Affairs

Agreement on Cooperation between Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies and Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

Cultural Exchange Programme (2012-2015)

Memorandum of Understanding on establishing of Border Haats across the border between Myanmar and India.

Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India Available at:

This visit was significant in view of the internal reforms taking place in Myanmar under the reformist president Thein Sein. Aung San Suu Kyi also visited India in the first week of November 2012 and reminded the world’s largest democracy India of how far it had strayed away from the ideals of the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, in the pursuit of real-politik. Of late, India pragmatically realized that the main beneficiary of strain in Indo-Myanmar relations was China, whether for access to hydrocarbon energy sources, transport corridors or strategic control of the Indian Ocean and other economic areas. A new era of relationship has developed between India and Myanmar where India has considerably improved its political, economic and strategic position in Myanmar.

Myanmar and Thailand

With China and India, Thailand is the third most important neighbours of Myanmar. Myanmar and Thailand had been historically linked by close cultural, religious and ethnic affinities. The Shans in the Shan state of Myanmar is heavily influenced by the Thai culture and they trace their origin to the Tais of Thailand. The commonality of religion in the form of Theravada school of Buddhism, culture and practices associated with Buddhism had the potential to provide foundation for a good relationship between the two countries. Unfortunately this did not happened as the reality of Thai-Myanmar relationship was characterised by competition and frequent
wars until Myanmar became a colony under Britain in 19th century. Most notably the historic events of Myanmarese kings attacking and inflicting huge damage to Ayuthia, the former capital of Thailand, invited hatred of the Thai to the cruelty of the invading Myanmarese King. The Myanmarese king snatched a great victory over the Thais in 1767 and brutally sacked the Thai capital Ayuthia. The Myanmarese kings rendered the Thais incapable of causing any trouble to them. Thailand succeeded in driving the Myanmarese out of Thailand and established a new capital at Bangkok in 1783, but the mutual hatred continued for long.

The various wars and victories made it clear that during the time of monarchy, Thailand was much harassed by the military power and oppression of the Myanmarese monarchy. Such historic hostilities were hardly bridged when forces of colonialism drifted the two countries apart. The British devastated the Myanmarese king’s powerful stature in the mainland Southeast Asia. The country became a British Indian colony, but Thailand could able to retain her independence acting as a buffer state between the British and the French in Southeast Asia. However being a neighbour of Myanmar, Thailand felt the threat of western colonialism. In order to maintain it independence it preferred to keep itself isolated from the British colony Myanmar. In fact colonialism had brought the country into two different conditions which have their impacts in the attitude and perception on one another. Myanmar directly experienced British colonial exploitation. According the Trager (1966, p. 261) colonialism even affected the writing and teaching of history in each country. Historical hostilities and British colonisation of Myanmar accentuated Thais’ despise and negative perceptions of Myanmar and its leadership who, as they felt, were unable to combat forces of colonialism.

147 According to James (2000), Myanmar and Thailand sought hegemony through control of the international trade route crossing the Malay Peninsula and round the Bay of Bengal. This prompted the two countries into frequent wars of sixteen to eighteenth centuries (ibid.).
148 Trager writes (1966, p. 261): “Every Burmese school child learns of the glories of Burmese arms and especially of Ayuthia; every Thai child learns of Burmese cruelties there. One learns of the loss of independence, the other of its retention. A residue of historical bitterness still prompts occasional suspicion of the Burmese by the Thai and some mild degree of mutual disdain”. Similarly Chutintaranond and U-Sha (2001, cited in James, 2006, p. 115) argues that there is a “conflict forever relived in contemporary Thai film, novels and drama, becoming the making of legend and contributing not a little to the modern Thai perception, in the popular imagination, of the evil Myanmarese.”
Independent Myanmar had its internal problems. The most immediate problem having repercussion on Myanmar-Thailand relations was the problem of insurgency and rebellion in Myanmar and Thailand’s alleged support to it. The communist rebellion and insurrections of the disgruntled ethnic minorities such as the Karen, the Shan, the Chin etc. denied Myanmar legitimacy of Myanmar as a nation. Myanmar was in a state of civil war which had cross-border implications. Myanmar was suspicious of Thailand supporting the anti-government rebels against the government of Myanmar. The opportunity for developing a cordial relation between the two countries was thus hindered. It was also restricted by the new emerging global politics of bipolarity, superpower rivalries and the conflicting stand of the two countries in response. Myanmar became a proponent of policy of non-alignment and neutrality, whereas Thailand became a pro-United States country and an ally of the United State’s policy of containment of communism in East and Southeast Asia. Sarit Thanasat, the Thai strongman and the army commander, who had taken power in a coup in 1957 acted as one of the agent of the United States in Southeast Asia. He promised President Eisenhower of the United States that he would turn Thailand into the bulwark that the United States needed to halt the communist advance in the region (Thant Myint-U, 2007, p. 288).

Suspicion and hostilities of the opposite stand during the cold war were felt on the issue of presence of remnants of Chinese Nationalist or Kuomintang troops in the northern Myanmar along the border with Thailand. Myanmar feared that the Kuomintang forces were receiving supplies and reinforcements through Thailand (Tinker, 1967, p. 359). When all diplomatic efforts to evacuate the Kuomintang forces out of Myanmar’s territory could not brought satisfactory outcome, Myanmar lost faith in persuasive method and, in disgust, the Myanmarese government launched military offensives against the Kuomintang forces within its boundary. Tensions in Myanmar-Thai relationship cropped up when the operations against the Chinese Nationalist forces had encroach upon Thailand’s territory. In the operation, Myanmar Air Force planes accidentally bombed Thai villages. Thailand considered the act of Myanmar as ‘general unfriendliness’. However further escalation of tensions was averted diplomatically. The government of Myanmar apologized and proffered compensation for the damage caused by the bombardment. Following this accident,
the two countries worked on to improve their relationship. As a part of normalization process, exchanges of official visits were made. In December 1954, Prime Minister U Nu paid a visit to Bangkok. He specifically apologised to the people of Thailand for past misdeeds by Myanmar and declared that Myanmar would work for the development of friendly and cordial relations. U Nu’s visit warmed Myanmar-Thailand relation to a great extent. Next year U Nu again paid visit to Thailand and signed treaty of peace and friendship between the two countries. However, such growing cordiality in the relationship between the two countries received a setback when Thailand, as an important ally of the United States in the region, decided to join South-east Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Myanmar on the other hand became a great supporter of non-alignment and neutrality and refused to join South-east Asia Treaty Organisation and vehemently opposed the accommodation of foreign military base within her borders. There was lack of mutual distrust and suspicion, yet diplomatic ties and official exchanges carried on the Thai-Myanmar relations. In 1960, the Thai majesties, the king and the queen visited Myanmar for the first time. Prime Minister U Nu’s humility, honesty and transparent goodwill were particularly effective in healing relations with Thailand (ibid.).

There was great changes in Myanmar after the coming of isolationist regime of Ne win in 1962. Tensions of old issues heightened between Myanmar and Thailand and new challenges erupted, as a result, Myanmar’s relations with Thailand began to slide down. Under Ne Win’s leadership, Myanmar harboured greater suspicious about Thailand’s intentions and its support for the minority rebels sheltering along the Thai-Myanmar border areas, especially the Shans and the Karen rebels. It can be reminded that a sizeable group of Shan dissidents live over the border in Thailand and used their sanctuary as a base of military operations against Myanmar government troops. Thailand, in turn, blamed the Myanmar military regime for encouraging drug trading in Thailand’s border areas. The porous border and the inability of the two countries to guard their borders against external intruders, including encroachment of the armies of the two countries beyond their borders and problems of insurgency and illegal trade were the core of Thai-Myanmar conflict and mistrust under Ne Win.
The military junta’s leftist and nationalistic ideology of the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ also alarmed the anti-communist Thailand leaders with suspicion that Myanmar would export socialism to Thailand. The fear of it was one reason for Thailand’s policy of letting ethnic armed groups notably, the Karen National Army (KNA) along the border to serve as a buffer area between the two countries. Thailand supported the Myanmarese rebels by allowing families of insurgent leaders to live in Thailand and letting insurgent armies (other than the communist) free to buy arms, ammunitions and other supplies (Thant Myint U, 2007, p. 299). Such mutual distrust led to gradual deterioration of Thai-Myanmar relations.

Myanmar’s leaning to socialistic ideology and nationalisation of all business enterprises and trade, and the economic mismanagement and deterioration posed problems in smooth growth of Thailand-Myanmar relations. Due to faulty policy and mismanagement of economy Myanmar experienced mounting shortage of availability of consumer goods. The huge demand for consumer goods encouraged smuggling across the border. It was highly profitable for the smugglers. Armed ethnic minority groups who were fighting for independence or autonomy controlled the illegal trade to finance their existence. Moreover under the ideology of ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’, Myanmar devoted attention to its national affairs alone which was reflected as policy of isolation and severance of ties from the outside world. While Myanmar was shunning of from outside world, Thailand was confronted with a much more serious concern of communist victory in Indo-China. There was re-unification of north and South Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge victory and the takeover of Lao by the communists (Kavi Chongkittavorn, 2001, p. 119). These events attracted attention of the Thai leaders because of their being a party to anti-communistic policy as an ally of the United States. As a result a Thailand accorded a low profile in its relation with Myanmar. The Thai-Myanmar border problems continued to be a sensitive issue with problems of security, insurgency and drug trafficking connected with it. Thailand’s sympathy for U Nu also contributed to the problem of deteriorating Thai-Myanmar relation during the period of Ne Win.149

149 U Nu was released from prison in 1966. After his release he led a new insurgent group with the idea of establishing a base in Thailand and win American support or other western support for an armed
The multiple problems along the Thai-Myanmar border continued to pose a source of constant tensions between the two countries. It is true even today. However beginning from 1970s, the two countries showed indications of some improvement in the bilateral ties boosted by opportunities of shared economic benefits. The decade of autarchic economic policy of Ne Win era had brought adverse economic conditions in Myanmar. Conversely during that time Thailand’s economy was modernised to a large extent and it was economically far ahead than Myanmar. In response to the deteriorating economic situation, Myanmar began to make certain economic opening to the outside world. At this juncture the leaders of the two countries saw opportunity for economic co-operation and consequently they began to change their perceptions towards one another. The new spirit in the Thai-Myanmar relations was evident in February 1973 when Deputy Finance Minister Brigadier Chartchai Chounhavan headed a Thai ‘goodwill mission’ to Myanmar. Three months later Myanmar reciprocated by paying a four-day ‘friendly visit’ to Bangkok. In July the same year, Thai government terminated U Nu’s political asylum and forced him to leave the country (Waint, 1974, p. 175). Myanmar continued to follow a closed and rigid political process in domestic front, but it adopted a policy of leniency in economic sector stimulating economic ties with Thailand and other countries.

Border trade between the two countries had a long history. During the parliamentary democracy era of Myanmar under U Nu, the value of trade was marginal since the composition of trade items and economy was predominantly agriculture based. Major trade items were rice, timber and other agricultural products. Moreover a large amount of border trade was conducted through illegal means and controlled by insurgents. In 1980s the government of Thailand began to push back the minority insurgents who had been seeking sanctuary inside its territory (IDEA, 2001, p. 119). Consequently, Thailand-Myanmar economic and political ties got a push. In 1986, Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila attempted to clarify that Thailand did not supported Myanmarese rebels and assured Myanmar that it would not tolerate cross-border smuggling, particularly the traffic in contraband arms destined for the rebel groups (Tilman, 1987, p. 261).

revolt inside Myanmar (Thant Myint U, 2007, p. 308). However, U Nu failed to get American support, even Thailand withdrew from supporting U Nu later.
The end of Ne Win era and adoption of policy of economic openness by the State Law and Order Restoration Council brought the two countries closer in political, economic and strategic fields. The two former competitors have moved to a stance of interdependence. The ideological and political shift in Myanmar apart, the period also coincide the end of cold war in global politics. With the collapse of erstwhile Soviet Union Thailand was relieved from much of the obligations it owed for the contentment of communism in Southeast Asia. Consequently room for closer Myanmar and Thailand relations was provided. Many economic and strategic considerations also boosted Myanmar-Thailand bilateral relations in the post-cold war or aftermath regime change in Myanmar. Particularly Thailand concerned on the growing Chinese influence in the political and economic spheres in Myanmar. It also needed raw material for its booming economy and market for finished industrial products. Myanmar, on the other hand, faced acute economic crisis and chronic shortage of consumer products, and needed investments to foster economic growth. Politically, Myanmar’s new military regime needed diplomatic support to claim its legitimacy which was shaking by the 1988 uprisings. Thus new political, economic and strategic thinking of the two countries assembled and in an effort to the opportunities for co-prosperity, many bilateral problems of the past such as issues related to drug trafficking, insurgency, border skirmishes and the immediate problems of influx of refugee from Myanmar to Thailand were sidelined.

Myanmar's liberalisation of external isolationism, economic reforms and openness congregated with Thailand’s ‘constructive engagement’ policy. The policy of Thailand was to positively engage with Myanmar’s military junta, but it would detach itself from what it considered interference in the internal affairs of Myanmar. The opportunistic policy of Thailand towards Myanmar also came under the broader framework of Association of Southeast Asian Nations\textsuperscript{150} which preferred to engage Myanmar, while the country was isolated as an outcast by most of the countries of the world. Thailand’s engagement policy filled up huge political, economic and diplomatic deficits of Myanmar. It can be mentioned here that on 14 December 1988, only four months after General Saw Maung had brutally suppressed the pro-democracy uprising of 1988, Thailand’s top military officers General Chavalit

\textsuperscript{150}Thailand was a founder member of Association of Southeast Asian Nations established in August 1968. The country occupies a prominent place in the association’s policies and decisions.
Yongchaiyudh visited Myanmar. The visit of the Thai officer matter much for the military junta of Myanmar which was passing through a critical phase in the wake of suppression of pro-democracy movement and the global anti-military regime pressures on Myanmar was high. His visit secured Thailand commercial gains in the form of logging rights, fishing contracts and construction deals for oil pipelines. However for the pro-democracy activists the visit of General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh and his pro-military regime stand was very disappointing. Ironically Thailand harboured a large number of Myanmarese pro-democracy activists who fled to its borders due to violent crackdown of the military.

The year 1993 got to set some misunderstanding in the relations due to Thailand’s alleged support of ethnic insurgents against Myanmar and it according warm welcome to a team of six Nobel laureates and representatives of two Nobel Prize winning organisations (Amnesty International and American Friends Service Committee) visiting Bangkok and meeting the Thai leaders on the issue of Myanmarese political refugee in Thailand (Langpoklakpam, 2006, pp.199-200). Problems related to cross-border tensions, illegal trade and Thailand’s sympathy for democracy activists on humanitarian ground creates misunderstanding between the two countries now and then, but cordiality in bilateral relations was by and large maintained and further strengthened. Since the visit of General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh in 1989 the economic and political relations between the two countries were greatly enhanced. Thailand had provided aid, scholarships and training courses to Myanmar officials. After 1995, Thailand broadened the scope of the co-operation with Myanmar to include agriculture, education, public health and other sectors.

Meanwhile Thailand developed an understanding that its bilateral relations with Myanmar would continued to be founded on unsteady foundations and security grounds unless the political impasse in was not resolved satisfactorily. This paved the way for Thailand’s changed perspective or policy focussed on to encouragement of political reconciliation process in Myanmar. Thailand wanted to push for political solution and reconciliation between the junta and the minorities democratically and asked the junta to strengthen political reform process in Myanmar. Thailand expected that by greater economic engagement and ensuring economic prosperity in Myanmar,
it would be able to assist in fostering political and social development, and contributed to
the stability in the region (James, 2006, p. 116). Thailand called a ‘Forward
Engagement’ policy under which it took a softer, less confrontationist engagement
approach towards the junta aimed at building mutual trusts with Myanmar through
exchanges of high-level visits and a series of consultations (Katanyan, 2006, pp. 830-
31) and at the same time fostering political reforms and national reconciliation. It
thought the security and economic considerations will be stabilise and better protected
in a democratic Myanmar. In 2003, Thailand Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai
proposed roadmap aimed to forge for peaceful reconciliation in Myanmar.
Investments from Thailand in Myanmar increased and it continued even the country

The foregoing analysis has made it clear that though Ne Win’s isolationist
Myanmar had established diplomatic relations with almost all the countries of the
world, it was formalistic and official, guided by its national or military regime’s
survival interest. During Ne Win era it was strictly ensured that the relationship with
its people and those of other countries be kept minimal. Closing the country from
outside world made Myanmar a hermit of Asia, which was known to be so nostalgic.
Ne Win’s isolationist Myanmar following an isolationist external affairs policy was
not something practised all on a sudden, rather it was guided by historical factor,
geographical situation of the country, global and internal political scenario, and
politisation of isolationism under the leadership of Ne Win. Myanmar’s relationship
with its neighbours was characterized by wars and competitions, the basis of which
was fear and hatred. The British and Japanese connection strengthened Myanmar’s
fear and dislike for the foreigners. On a world divided by bipolarity based on cold war
competitions, independent Myanmar under U Nu followed a policy of non-alignment
and neutralism with the primary objective of freedom of policy in internal affairs and
to avoid great powers’ interference. When Ne Win established a military regime in
Myanmar, the non-aligned and neutral policy of Myanmar was transformed into
isolationism. The isolationist regime under Ne Win made clear distinction between
official relations and people to people contact. Both were curtailed, the latter was
strictly imposed. At the same time, Myanmar welcomed external trade and investment
in its own benefits. Thus external policy of isolationism forms a part of the internal
political process of isolationism under the system of Ne Win’s despotism and isolationist ideology.

Aftermath the violent crushing of pro-democracy movement in Myanmar, the military regime faced western ostracism and sanctions. In a period of political and economic deterioration, the western ostracism was about to uprooted the military regime. However the country’s immediate neighbours such as China and Thailand and later India, followed a pro-military regime policy by establishing opportunistic engagement with economic and strategic consideration as the prime concerns. Myanmar’s neighbours acted as a balance for Myanmar by following a policy of constructive engagement vis a vis western isolation and sanction. With international community divided on Myanmar issue and Myanmar getting political and economic support from its neighbours, military’s position in Myanmar strengthened. Being Asian countries and close neighbours of Myanmar, the neighbours also knew well cultural values and political traditions of Myanmar and especially India and Thailand perceived that political reconciliation in Myanmar could be affected by democratic persuasion and engagement. With the military’s stature strengthened in Myanmar, it followed a roadmap for safe transfer of power. The military has successfully installed a manoeuvred ‘disciplined democracy’ in Myanmar which has ensure dominance of military in national affairs, and personal and economic security of the military leaders. Of late, policy convergences of countries interested in the Myanmarese affairs in favour of restoration of democracy in Myanmar have been observed. Even the closest ally of the military junta, China pushed for political reforms in Myanmar. Yet competition and rivalry for gaining foothold in a democratic Myanmar to enjoy economic benefits and secure strategic position cannot be denied.