

Book Review: Rajiv Bhatia, India–Myanmar Relations - Changing Contours

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Bhatia, Rajiv (2016), *India–Myanmar Relations – Changing Contours*

New York: Routledge/ISEAS – First South Asian edition, ISBN: 978-1-138-19132-7, 257 pages

India–Myanmar relations have emerged in recent years as a subject of immense interest among policymakers and in academia, both within and outside of the region. The reason for this is not difficult to ascertain: Myanmar’s opening up has resulted in creating new space for major powers to increase their presence and influence in this geo-strategically vital Southeast Asian nation at a time when geopolitical competition and collaboration are growing in nearby subregions such as the South China Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Mekong River Basin. China’s southward orientation, India’s eastward drive, Japan’s renewed interests in these subregions, and the United States’ rebalancing strategy vis-à-vis Asia are increasingly redefining the geostrategic importance of Myanmar – located at the centre of the Indo–Pacific region – as their interests intersect and overlap in and around this region. The book under review explains these factors in detail and places the growing focus and significance of the India–Myanmar relationship within these changing regional dynamics.

With his vast experience in dealing with and studying Myanmar as a diplomat during his long career in the Indian foreign service and since his retirement as head of a New Delhi–based think tank, Rajiv Bhatia’s book is both a scholarly and a personal account of the historical evolution of India–Myanmar relations, the current relationship between the countries, and the likely direction in which this relationship might unfold. There are three major themes that run throughout the book and which will render the author’s analyses and assessments relevant for years to come, not only for policymakers and in academic circles in India and Myanmar but also for other regional players: the nuances of India’s approach towards Myanmar in the 1990s, the China factor in India–Myanmar relations, and the significance of India’s Northeast region in Delhi’s engagements with Naypyidaw.

In the early 1990s, India reviewed its Myanmar policy, allowing itself to engage the military regime. This approach was criticised both within and beyond India and Myanmar, and debates continue as to whether the policy shift from idealism to pragmatism has served Delhi’s long-term interests in the country. As someone who had a “ringside” view of the policy change, as the author puts it in the book, Bhatia spells out the key factors that prompted Delhi to opt for a more realistic approach towards its eastern neighbour – the most significant factor being China’s growing strategic penetration into Myanmar and the security

threat emanating from India's Northeast region, which shares a long land boundary with Myanmar (p. 101). Bhatia defines the approach as a "two-track policy" that combines India's "moral and political support to the democratic forces" and simultaneously "engage[s][the] military government in order to improve and upgrade government-to-government relations" (pp. 101–102).

The author rightly argues that the approach helped India strengthen its ties with a strategically vital neighbour as increased political interactions at the highest level opened up new areas for cooperation in the economic and security domains, evident in the growth of bilateral trade and defence cooperation in the border regions. The author asserts, "this flexibility allowed India to support, encourage and keep in touch with the pro-democracy movement, while continuing to strengthen its relations with the military government" (p. 200). Bhatia's book provides detailed explanations of why, when, and how the shift in India's policy towards Myanmar was carried out in the 1990s. The author admits that India–Myanmar relations witnessed "ups and downs" during the same period because of "many contradictory, internal pulls and pressures" (p. 195). This hints at the challenge Delhi faces in balancing value and interest in foreign policy, particularly in dealing with political changes in the neighbourhood. The book refrains from entering into the larger value vs interest debate in India's foreign policy, but provides interesting insights into some aspects of the subject.

Underlining the importance of the China factor in India–Myanmar relations, the book devotes an entire chapter to the subject of the "India–China–Myanmar triangle." Assessing the interactions between China and India in Myanmar, the two former countries often being described as "competitors" or "rivals," the author argues that some elements of competition between the two Asian giants is but natural as they try to "expand their areas of influence in Myanmar" (p. 207). While granting that India is "far behind in the race," the author believes that India has some advantages: "it possesses a few valuable assets, the principal being Myanmar's traditional inclination to maintain and promote some kind of equilibrium, not parity, between Myanmar–China relations and Myanmar–India relations" (p. 208). The author believes that while the triangular relationship will be impacted by changing India–China relations, Myanmar is also an active player in shaping the interactions. Hence, the author argues that "the triangle should be viewed and assessed not in isolation but in the wider context of Myanmar's worldview since independence, and the gradual transformation of its foreign policy in recent years" (p. 209).

Additionally, the significance of India's Northeast region in India–Myanmar relations has a prominent place in the book because of “the inexorable logic of geography and ethnicity and their combined impact” (p. 4) on India–Myanmar ties; thus, from the perspective of cross-border security, trade, and connectivity, India's Northeast region plays a pivotal role. While dealing with India's Northeast region, the author emphasises the need to bring the focus onto the people of the region – their aspirations and needs. As the author asserts, “an effective way to ‘sell’ India's Eastern policy and the need for closer relations with Myanmar would be to take the people of eastern India into confidence and take care of their economic interests” (p. 168). “The Northeast angle,” as the author puts it, is important as, until recently, it has not been well understood in Delhi in the context of India's engagements with its eastern neighbours.

In the beginning of the book, the author discusses a few geo-economic and geopolitical concepts that define Myanmar's geostrategic value. Is Myanmar “the gateway,” “the bridge,” or “the crossroads” connecting countries and regions in Asia, or is it a “buffer state” between India and China? The book does not give a clear-cut answer to these questions, but the author's preference for viewing Myanmar as the bridge is clearly expressed many times. For instance, the author argues that “as opposed to the narrative of India–China competition in Myanmar, the potential of cooperation scenario[s] should also be considered” (p. 206). Again, the author believes growing connectivity projects and proposals such as the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor and the Maritime Silk Road “have the potential to reduce the negative impact of ‘the China factor’ and provide new opportunities” in India–Myanmar relations.

The book is a significant contribution to understanding India–Myanmar relations, particularly the period since 1990, which has witnessed Delhi's increasing eastward drive and Naypyidaw's search for more strategic options to counterbalance its growing dependence on China. The book will be a rich resource for anyone interested in India–Myanmar relations and the wider regional geopolitics within which the relationship has been evolving.

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