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Strategic Contours: India and Myanmar

P S Rajeshwar

Abstract

India and Myanmar have deep historical, cultural, ethnic and commercial links. Common geopolitical, economic and security interests exist that are spread across vast land and maritime frontiers. Apart from this, there is a sizeable Indian diaspora residing in Myanmar for generations. India's land border with Myanmar of over 1600 km, involving Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram adjoin Kachin, Sagaing and Chin states across. Myanmar also serves as the land bridge to South East Asia and coupled with the maritime connection in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, makes it a very important neighbour in the regional's security calculus.

Introduction

"The defence of Burma is in fact the defence of India, and it is India's primary concern no less than Burma's to see that its frontiers remain inviolate. In fact, no responsibility can be considered too heavy for India when it comes to the question of defending Burma."

—KM Panikkar, 1943¹

India has been pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy in recent times that puts immediate neighbours at the forefront. "Under its 'Neighbourhood

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First’ policy, (Indian) Government is committed to developing friendly and mutually beneficial relations with all its neighbours. India is an active development partner and is involved in several projects in these countries”.² As part of this policy India has been engaging Myanmar with great purpose.

India launched its Look East Policy in 1991 to promote economic, strategic and cultural relations with the countries of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). This helped to highlight the importance of Myanmar in our foreign policy, further emphasised by our Act East Policy in 2014, leading to strengthening of relations in the last decade.

In a pivotal moment on 1 February 2021, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) staged a coup and seized power from the democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. India reacted cautiously to this event. “We have noted the developments in Myanmar with deep concern. India has always been steadfast in its support of the process of democratic transition in Myanmar. We believe that the rule of law and the democratic process must be upheld. We are monitoring the situation closely”.³ Senior Gen Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar Armed Forces has since run the country through the State Administration Council (SAC).

India and Myanmar Relations: The Ebb and Flow

Myanmar (known till 1989 as Burma) was a part of the British Indian empire till 1937. Consequently, a number of Indians were involved in Myanmar’s trade, business and key services such as railways, banking and other public utilities. Burma gained independence in January 1948. “A Treaty of Friendship was signed between the two nations (India and Burma) in 1951”.⁴ During this period, the ties between India and Burma were special. “Warmth in bilateral relations is reflected in the statement of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru: We are in frequent touch

with the Government of Burma on many matters. We are not only friendly in the normal sense of the word, but if I may say so somewhat more friendly”.⁵ Throughout the 1950s the relations remained warm and stable. The Burmese nationalisation initiatives, following a military coup by General Ne Win in the early 1960s, saw the exodus of a number of Indians to India. Myanmar continued isolating itself from the world and declined as an economy in the next two decades. The Indians now present in Myanmar, (estimated at approx. 2.9 million in 2009), are either descendants of the original settled community, often small traders and farmers, or expats in trade, investment and industry.

Myanmar was also plagued by ethnic strife and faced huge challenges integrating as a nation, meanwhile, Chinese influence in Myanmar continued increasing. During this period India prioritised its commitment to the return of democracy in Myanmar instead of engaging with it. But by 1988 India realised that it needed to work with Myanmar more constructively to counter adverse security developments in its East. A review of India’s position then led to progressing our ties with Myanmar. “A Memorandum of Understanding on Peace and Tranquility in Border Areas was signed by India and Myanmar in January 1994”.⁶

Myanmar became a member of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in 1997, which facilitated its larger role in the development of the region through participation in infrastructure and connectivity initiatives. India also began engaging Myanmar through the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) initiative, a sub-regional organisation established in November 2000. Following Gen Than Shwe’s visit to India in 2010, Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh reciprocated with a visit in 2012 and thereafter in 2014. These meetings enabled many important memorandums and agreements. Military and economic ties continued with a new found impetus.

India and Myanmar Relations in recent times

“When in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Act East policy, India’s economy was relatively robust and its global profile was higher than it was in the decades prior. Modi gave a new thrust to intensify economic, strategic and diplomatic relations with countries that share common concerns with India on China’s growing economic and military strength and its implications for the evolving regional order”.⁷ Significantly, he announced the policy during the 12th ASEAN summit in Myanmar and followed it up with a bilateral visit in 2017. Aung San Suu Kyi visited India in 2016 as her country’s State Counsellor. These visits helped the political leadership to develop an understanding of each other’s challenges and progress key aspects of their relations. India also put in an effort to train Myanmar’s parliamentarians in order to help the democratic processes.

The trade between India and Myanmar which signifies its economic relations has roughly doubled in the last decade. “India is the 5th largest trading partner of Myanmar. India’s export to Myanmar during 2019-20 was US\$ 973.89 million and import from Myanmar was US\$ 547.25 million. There exists enormous potential for bilateral trade enhancement and a number of initiatives such as upgrading the Integrated Check Post at Tamu-Moreh, and infrastructure at Rihkhawdar-Zokhawthar, negotiations on signing a coastal shipping agreement, development of Sittwe Port, etc., are in various stages of implementation with the aim of increasing trade with Myanmar.... In recent times, engagement with Myanmar in the energy sector has expanded with Indian investments in Myanmar’s energy sector being over US\$ 1.2 billion. Discussions are ongoing to establish a petrochemical refinery at Thanlyin in Yangon Region”.⁸ However, the pandemic has retarded trade in the last two years, understandably due to border restrictions, protests against the coup, and continuing connectivity challenges.

Growth in trade is often dependent on connectivity, which has been a challenge between the two countries. India has tried to augment this by executing key projects in Myanmar since 2000. “India’s Border Roads Organisation (BRO) built the India-Myanmar Friendship Road connecting Moreh (India) to Tamu, Kalembo and Kalewa in Myanmar in 2001”.⁹ TATA Motors has established a Turbo-truck assembly plant, while TCIL has built a high-speed data link project connecting various cities in Myanmar. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) attempts to connect Kolkata to Lawngtlai in Mizoram via Sittwe Port (by ship) and Paletwa on River Kaladan (by Inland Water Transport) and thereafter by road. The project has unfortunately got delayed due to the pandemic and disturbances following the Tatmadaw take-over. “The Kaladan project faces a new deadline in 2023, but government officials are worried this will be missed too. Much of this concern is centred on the 110 km stretch of road within Myanmar, which has proved particularly tough to navigate, with a series of hurdles—including a company involved going bankrupt, and a Myanmar militia group—playing truant with its construction”.¹⁰

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is a 1,360-km highway from Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand that India is deeply engaged within Myanmar. It has the potential to boost trade and commerce not only in Myanmar but also with the ASEAN-countries. However, this project has run into a hurdle. “The work on the Kalewa-Yagyi stretch has been delayed for a number of reasons including the challenge of building roads with “steep gradients and sharp curves,” due to which only one-fourth of the road has been done”.¹¹ These connectivity projects thus need sharper focus, better delivery and lots of safeguarding to benefit the local people.

The MGC group comprises, India, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, which aims to facilitate closer contact among the people inhabiting the major river basins in these countries and enhancing

cooperation in tourism, culture, education, and transportation and communications. “India has launched 68 community-oriented projects worth US\$ 3.4 million under the Quick Impact Projects scheme during 2016-2020—of which 38 projects have been completed and 30 other projects are under implementation”.¹² People to People contacts between India and Myanmar have increased due to these types of projects.

India-Myanmar defence relations have considerably improved in recent years. More interactions have taken place since the visit of India’s Chief of the Army Staff in 2017, when 10 ambulances, 15 sniffer dogs and 4 English language laboratories were gifted to Myanmar. In November 2017, the first edition of India-Myanmar Table Top Exercise was held. In 2018, bilateral exercises between the armies and navies of the two nations were conducted. In 2019 Army to Army Staff Talks were held after which, both armies carried out a three-week-long “coordinated flushing out” of the militant groups operating along their side of the border. India remains concerned about the India based insurgent groups operating from Myanmar which continue to cause a security concern. An MoU on Defence Cooperation was signed. In May 2020, Myanmar handed over 22 cadres of Indian insurgent groups. The visit of Chief of the Army Staff and Foreign Secretary to Myanmar in October 2020 during the pandemic was a significant one too. Later, India gave a Kilo-class submarine, INS Sindhuvir, to Myanmar Navy. Both sides signed an MoU on Exchange of White Shipping. India also imparted training to Myanmar defence personnel in UN Peacekeeping. Overall, there has been an increase in visits of military leaders, training cooperation, capacity building and defence exports from India to Myanmar.

The Rohingya Issue

The Rohingya Muslims who mostly live in Rakhine State, exceed a million in numbers and are not considered as its citizens by Myanmar. Tensions between them and the Buddhist community have increased in

the last decade. Of late, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) have indulged in attacks on the Tatmadaw security posts and even Hindu minority villages in the area. In 2017 escalation of violence eventually led to the internal displacement and mass exodus of Rohingyas to the Cox Bazar region in Bangladesh. UN Human Rights have since brought out a report on this conflict. “Non-State armed groups have committed crimes against civilians, for which they should be held accountable. During the period under review, the Tatmadaw was the main perpetrator of serious human rights violations and crimes under international law in Kachin, Rakhine and Shan States”.¹³

The China Factor

Myanmar’s borders with India and China make it a crucial state for both neighbours. Bertil Lintner described Myanmar’s value to India’s security—“But the problems in India’s northeast are far from over, and Burma remains a cockpit of anarchy that continues to have a severe impact on India’s national security. And the regional rivalry with China is actually becoming more serious—even in areas far away from the traditional conflict zones in India’s northeast”.¹⁴ Hence the nature of Myanmar-China relations need to always be factored in.

China and Myanmar have a 2100 km land border which was mutually settled in 1960. A number of powerful armed groups operate against the Tatmadaw near this border. During the reign of Gen Ne Win, the Chinese built a strong relationship with Burma. China’s ‘Malacca Dilemma’ prompted it to seek access to ports in Myanmar that abut the Indian Ocean. Further, China has been keen to utilise hydrocarbon and mineral resources of Myanmar to meet its requirements. “The Myanmar-China Pipelines project comprises of the construction of two separate, parallel pipelines for transporting crude oil and natural gas from Daewoo International’s offshore blocks A-1 and A-3 in Myanmar, to China”.¹⁵ China has also been keen to limit Western influence in Myanmar.

China launched the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) over the last decade. “A huge array of activities is being implemented under the BRI framework in Myanmar...: (1) the interconnection of the Myanmar and Chinese national electricity grids, (2) the China-Myanmar High-Speed Railway, (3) the Sino-Myanmar Land and Water Transportation Passage and (4) special economic zones (SEZs) and Industrial Zones”.¹⁶ These large scale projects utilise the capacities and surpluses available in Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), but might eventually end up creating a huge debt for the people of Myanmar.

The Myanmar Approach

Myanmar has always wanted to be able to balance its two big neighbours, China and India. Within Myanmar, a hybrid model of governance was in vogue till the coup, where the Tatmadaw had ample control over its functioning. On the external front, the Aung San Suu Kyi led government appeared to have leaned heavily on China for its growth and development. Once it opened up to the world, Myanmar welcomed support from the US and EU too. Aid from Japan benefited Myanmar in large measure. “By 2017, the government had provided more than a total of 1 trillion yen (\$9.3 billion) in loan assistance, more than 320 billion yen (\$2.9 billion) in grant aid, and 98 billion yen (\$912 million) in technical assistance”.¹⁸ Further, Myanmar actively participated in ASEAN and BIMSTEC activities.

Elections were held in November 2020, where State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, who headed the NLD, led her party to victory. But the Tatmadaw-Myanmar military-seized power on 1 February 2021, disputing the results and citing fraud. Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under arrest. The people, who had tasted the freedom of social media and global connectivity did not take kindly to the coup and derailment of the NLD government and carried out a spate of protests throughout the country.

The NLD leaders formed the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CPRH). Opposition activists have since organised strikes and held mass protests, while local militias have taken to violence against the military.

Western nations were swift in their condemnation of the military seizing power in Myanmar. “The US denounced in the strongest possible terms Burma’s military leaders for seeking to reject the will of the people of Burma also announced the redirection of \$42 million of bilateral assistance from the government to civil society”.¹⁹ EU soon followed suit with sanctions in addition to existing bans that prohibited military training and military cooperation with Tatmadaw. “Restrictive measures, which now apply to a total of 43 individuals and 6 entities, include an asset freeze and a prohibition from making funds available to the listed individuals and entities. Additionally, a travel ban applicable to listed persons prevents them from entering or transiting through EU territory”.²⁰ Japan expressed grave concern on the developments. “The Japanese government’s approach to the coup in Myanmar is in some ways a middle road between the ‘distant’ Western states that prioritise human rights and democracy and the ‘local’ Asian states that prioritise stability and development”.²¹ Japan continues to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Myanmar.

The previous sanctions on Myanmar do not seem to have had much effect on the Tatmadaw. The country had lived in isolation for a long time before it marginally integrated in the last decade. Before the coup, Myanmar was already under sanctions for human rights violations and the Rohingya issue. “The (UN HRC thematic) report has identified the two conglomerates in Myanmar which are essentially holding companies i.e., Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) as being owned and influenced by senior Tatmadaw leaders who have also been identified as responsible for gross human rights violations and family members”.²² Thus it is likely that

fresh sanctions would not have made much difference to the Tatmadaw and instead added to the suffering of the common man. “Sanctions and boycott by the West could once again lead to the international isolation of Myanmar which would inevitably push it into further dependence on China”.²³

The Chinese response to the Tatmadaw seizing power has been a mixed one. While it has stuck by ‘Non-interference’ in Myanmar at the UN, it has not hesitated to influence the power groups in Myanmar. “While maintaining a line of communication with the NLD, Beijing now seeks to sit out the deepening crisis and push ahead with its own interests in Myanmar with the group that holds power”.²⁴ However, it has maintained its distance from the underground National Unity Government (NUG). On the other hand, China has also to deal with a degree of mistrust with the Tatmadaw. “Although China is the largest arms supplier to Myanmar, the military suspects Beijing’s involvement in the country’s multitude of internal conflicts”.²⁵

The Russian response to the February 2021 event appears to be based on ‘non-interference and sovereignty’ in Myanmar. Russia’s Deputy defence minister attended a military parade in Myanmar on 21 March, while Min Aung Hlaing visited Moscow thereafter. Since Myanmar perceives Russia as a neutral power that is responsive to its needs, the latter is in a position to appreciably influence the Tatmadaw.

The World Bank has been supporting financial initiatives in Myanmar in the past decade which have alleviated poverty in the strife-torn country. But its forecast has now turned quite grim. “Myanmar’s economy and people continue to be severely tested by the ongoing impacts of the military coup and the surge in COVID-19 cases in 2021. Following an expected 18 per cent contraction of the economy in the year ended September 2021, the World Bank’s Myanmar Economic Monitor, released today, projects growth of 1 per cent in the year to September 2022”.²⁶

India's Challenges and Way Ahead

India is directly affected by the security situation close to its border with Myanmar. On 21 November the PLA Manipur and Manipur Naga Peoples Front (MNPF) laid an ambush to kill a Commanding Officer and six other ranks, and then fled across the border. This incident was cited by Indian Foreign Secretary, Mr HV Shringla, during his visit to Myanmar on 21 December. "The visit also provided an opportunity to raise matters relating to India's security, especially in the light of the recent incident in Churachandpur district in southern Manipur. Foreign Secretary stressed the need to put an end to any violence and maintain peace and stability in the border areas. Both sides reiterated their commitment to ensure that their respective territories would not be allowed to be used for any activities inimical to the other".³¹

The situation in Myanmar again came to fore during the Quad Foreign Minister's meeting in Melbourne on 22 February. The issue of India is opposed to imposing sanctions on the Tatmadaw was raised. External Affairs Minister Dr Jaishankar said, "Our dilemma is this. We (India and Myanmar) have a complicated border with insurgents operating. One way to secure that border is by working with the government, which means the military. So, despite unfortunate developments, we can't not work with them".³²

Stability in Myanmar is a key imperative for us. Further, while it is evident that any solution to the imbroglio in Myanmar must come from within, we need to continue with our attempts to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi and progress efforts to convince the Tatmadaw leadership to restore democracy at the earliest. Simultaneously there is a need to provide succour to the refugees who have already crossed over, based on pure humanitarian consideration, at the same time discouraging any huge influx.

The Tatmadaw appears to have its hands full with the internal security situation there. A prolonged period of conflict looks likely, wherein it will be tough to progress any business or infrastructure building, thereby

hindering any worthwhile development India will also have to interact more often with the Tatmadaw leadership to keep up the pressure on insurgent groups that operate from their side to secure our sensitive NE region.

There is a need to work closely with ASEAN and like-minded Japan, which are keeping a balanced approach towards Myanmar. Concurrently, we have to counter the influence of China on Myanmar, which presently appears to be benefiting due to the West pulling away. All this must be done with a long-term perspective.

Conclusion

February 2021 saw a setback to democracy and stability in Myanmar, where the hybrid government model was abandoned. Myanmar being geostrategically important is not only a part of our 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East policies' but has also the 'Indo-Pacific dynamics'. The Russia-Ukraine war has currently taken away the intense focus from Myanmar, but India will require to monitor and act with agility. Till the aspirations of Myanmar's people are met, for which the elections in 2023 will be a key milestone, the situation could remain uncertain and volatile. Meanwhile, India will do well to visualise various outcomes and be prepared to respond to them robustly.

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