

Myanmar-India Relations: The Way Forward

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Bilateral relations between India and Myanmar are important not only for these two countries, but for the region concerned, namely South Asia and South East Asia. Of its various neighbours, India has accorded utmost attention to Pakistan and China for obvious reasons, with the result that other neighbours often feel neglected. With Myanmar, however, India has worked to expand and deepen bilateral relations in the past two decades.

Myanmar has had no choice but to treat its giant neighbours, China and India, with considerable respect and consideration, especially because its relations with much of the West have been adversarial or limited, in view of Myanmar's internal politics in the past several decades. Its neighbours in the east have of course also been of great significance to Myanmar, especially since it joined ASEAN in 1997. Thus, China, India and ASEAN represent three key pillars of Myanmar's foreign policy.

This essay will first trace briefly the rich historical background of the India-Myanmar relationship. Then it will attempt to showcase its present profile in all its important dimensions. A critical examination of the issues that exercise the minds of policymakers and analysts will follow. This should lead us to looking at prospects and draw some conclusions in the end.

Historical Backdrop

Awareness in Myanmar about India has always been very high; but awareness about Myanmar in India is limited and uneven, given Indians' deep-seated tendency to look westward. This has been changing recently, as India's Look East Policy (LEP) has taken roots in the past two decades. Indians are also becoming more conscious of possibilities and complexities of India's neighbourhood, but outside the official establishment, they still spend much

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more time thinking about India's neighbour in the West and its neighbour in the North than its other neighbours. This asymmetry remains a factor in managing India-Myanmar relations.

The author had the exceptional privilege of participating and assisting in the management of India-Myanmar bilateral relations when he accompanied Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit on his path-breaking visit to Yangon in March 1993. Much later, he escorted Chairman SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) Senior General Than Shwe on his historic visit to India in October 2004. Another highpoint came as he watched from close quarters the exceptional warmth with which Myanmar's leaders and people alike welcomed the Vice President of India, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, during his visit to Yangon and Mandalay in November 2003. Clearly, a historical perspective is an essential key for obtaining an accurate appreciation of present-day relations.

Myanmar-India links are deeply rooted in history and belief. The legend of Shwedagon Pagoda, the story of two Burmese merchants meeting and obtaining a few strands of the hair of Lord Buddha, may just be that – a legend, but it has had a powerful hold on the ordinary person's perception in Myanmar that Buddhism originated in India. Historians point out that a royal monk of Asoka the Great visited Myanmar in 228 BCE, bearing the Buddha's message and Buddhist sacred texts. Later, Theravada Buddhism reached Myanmar from India via Sri Lanka. An intense desire on the part of ordinary people as well as high dignitaries to visit Bodh Gaya and other famous Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India continues to be a strong bond between Myanmar and India.

Beyond religion and philosophy, ethnic links between the people of four Indian states bordering on Myanmar, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, and the people of western Myanmar, including Chins, Kukis and Kachins, have continued through the millennia. These links, cemented by linguistic commonality or affinity, family and tribal ties, traditional trade exchanges, shared lifestyles and conflict and cooperation among rulers, began well before India and Myanmar emerged as nation-states. They are certain to continue and flourish in the future.

This pre-colonial setting underwent a major transformation during the colonial period when at the political and administrative level, the two countries got linked with each other as never before. Burma was ruled as part of British India between 1886 and 1937, with Calcutta as the seat of government. The educational institutions in Rangoon were affiliated to Calcutta University at

the time. The British brought Indians to help them govern Burma. It is estimated that 60 per cent of the population in central Rangoon at the time was Indian. The inflow of Indians became both a new link and a cause of tensions and trouble in later years.

Quite apart from the substantive presence at the time of Indians in administration, police, education, trade and agriculture, two important facets are still widely remembered at the popular level. These are: the exile until death in Rangoon of India's last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar and the exile until death in Ratnagiri of Thibaw, Burma's last King; and visits, stay/imprisonment, and work of prominent leaders of India's freedom struggle such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose. Bose raised money and men in Burma for the Indian National Army (INA), which fought valiantly though unsuccessfully, for India's freedom. Both before and after its Independence, India extended full support to Burma's freedom struggle, rejoicing immensely when it finally arrived on 4 January 1948.

Burma's post-independence period may be classified under four categories: the U Nu era (1948–62), the Ne Win era (1962–88), the transition (1988–90), and the SLORC/SPDC era (1991–2010).

During the one and a half decade since Independence, the two countries learnt to coexist and connect with each other as nations-states. The relationship faced critical issues: boundary demarcation, impact of insurgencies in border regions, nationalization of Indians' businesses and legal bar on their ownership of land, establishing and managing relations with the superpowers as well as the powerful neighbour in the north – China. Under the stewardship of Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru and U Nu, who enjoyed very close friendship, interstate relations became friendly and cooperative.

In the Ne Win era, on the other hand, relations were “correct but not close”, as Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit put it once. Brutal measures taken against the Indian community that led to a massive exodus and a general mutual neglect led to estrangement. Insurgencies deepened it. Nevertheless, personal relations between the top leaders – Indira Gandhi and Ne Win – remained good, although they were not marked by the same intellectual affinity and empathy as between Nehru and U Nu. The visit by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1987 was a sincere endeavour to inject fresh momentum into the relationship, but it was overtaken by the turbulent events that shook the country to its core.

The period of transition, 1988–90, witnessed change of governments in both countries. At this juncture, India extended strong support to the pro-democracy movement, driven by its principles and values and probably expecting that the 1990 elections would usher in democracy, thereby opening a new chapter in the history of Myanmar. The two governments experienced serious tensions in their relations. This could well be considered as the lowest point in bilateral relations, marked as it was by open mutual recrimination.

The fourth period, spanning twenty years, 1991–2010, witnessed tremendous improvement, expansion and diversification of bilateral relations. This has coincided, not by accident, with the launch, pursuit and execution of India's LEP. This period has two fairly distinct phases, with the first phase running from 1991 to 1999, and the second phase starting with Vice Chairman SPDC General Maung Aye's visit to India in 2000 and culminating in the second visit by Chairman SPDC Senior General Than Shwe to India in July 2010. The first phase saw the Indian government adopting, after a careful review, the two-track policy of engaging the Government of Myanmar, while continuing its support for the cause of democracy. By the time the second phase concluded, the bilateral relationship had reached a high level of maturity, momentum and substance, even as New Delhi continued to urge national reconciliation and inclusive governance.

It is in this backdrop that we need to evaluate critically the present state of relations, examining how the changed political situation and new constitutional arrangements in the wake of 2010 elections in Myanmar would impact the future pattern of Myanmar-India relations.

Present Profile

Of the four principal pillars of bilateral relations, namely (a) political, (b) security and defence, (c) economic, and (d) "other" cooperation, the highest importance should perhaps be accorded to Political Cooperation, which is the key driver. The leaderships in the two countries have been committed to broadening and enhancing "the multi-dimensional relationship". The relations reflect the multifarious and traditional linkages that bind the two countries as close neighbours, inspired by the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. The two governments have strongly believed that expanding economic, social and developmental engagement would help harness the considerable potential of bilateral relations, and doing so would contribute significantly to the socio-economic progress of both countries. This fundamental conviction came into sharp focus at the conclusion of the last highest-level dialogue between

the two governments when Senior General Than Shwe, Chairman SPDC, visited India in July 2010. The visit represented a high watermark in bilateral engagement, following the productive visit of Vice Senior General Maung Aye, Vice Chairman SPDC, to India in April 2008, and of Mr Hamid M. Ansari, Vice President of India, to Myanmar in February 2009.

Transcending the bilateral framework, the two governments have been on the same page when it comes to forging regional and sub-regional cooperation on a wide range of issues. Myanmar has been consistently appreciative and supportive of India's deepening engagement with ASEAN; India's support for building an ASEAN Community by 2015; and New Delhi's assistance to CLMV (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam) countries. Myanmar has been pleased to see New Delhi treating it as "a natural bridge between ASEAN and India." Further, Myanmar seems to share India's perception about a considerable degree of convergence in the developmental domain between parts of South Asia and South East Asia. This explains the two countries' enthusiasm in working towards sub-regional cooperation through institutions such as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and MGC (Mekong-Ganga Cooperation). Myanmar's entry in SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) as an Observer in August 2008 assumes importance in this context. It is worth underlining that in India's Ministry of External Affairs, relations with Myanmar are managed by experts specializing in neighbourhood affairs, who report directly to the Foreign Secretary and the Minister of External Affairs.

Moreover, on numerous multilateral issues, the two countries maintain a common position, based on shared views. They favour a strong United Nations as a key factor in tackling global challenges and advocate the reform of the United Nations, including the Security Council, in order to make it "more representative, credible and effective". India has been particularly appreciative that Myanmar has consistently supported India's bid for permanent membership of the UN Security Council, and that Myanmar follows a generally friendly policy towards India as far as South Asian affairs are concerned.

As regards Security and Defence Cooperation, it is treated as a subject of immense significance, given the long history of insurgencies in both countries. Stability having been regarded as an essential prerequisite for development of the border region, special efforts have been made in the past two decades to strengthen cooperation between security authorities in order to tackle the problems created by terrorists, insurgents and criminals. Dialogue mechanisms, legal instruments and agreements, regular arrangements for exchange of

intelligence and for security cooperation have been in place for long. A new instrument, the Treaty on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters, was signed in August 2010. As the Joint Statement issued at the end of Senior General Than Shwe's visit put it:

Both leaders reiterated the assurance that the territory of either would not be allowed for activities inimical to the other and resolved not to allow their territory to be used for training, sanctuary and other operations by terrorist and insurgent organizations and their operatives.

If despite the ongoing cooperation between security authorities, the problem has not disappeared but only reduced in scope and impact, the question arises whether this is due to insufficient cooperation in practice, difficult terrain, logistical constraints or lack of progress in negotiating a settlement within the respective countries. Certainly, a key requirement on the Indian side of the border is that insurgent activity needs to be addressed decisively through sustained political dialogue and economic development, besides firm action in the security sphere.

Given the geo-strategic importance of Myanmar for India and vice versa, the essential linkage of defence between India's North-East and Myanmar's western region, and the fact that India has the largest military in South Asia and Myanmar's Tatmadaw (military) is the second-largest active force in South East Asia, it follows that defence cooperation should be an important component of bilateral relations. In the past decade, this has witnessed considerable strengthening through a series of regular visits at the Service Chief level (and below), provision of training facilities, visits by naval ships, supply or sale of equipment and, above all, a continuing dialogue on professional matters and strategic issues. Comparing it to what takes place between China and Myanmar in this sphere is not the only way to measure it; another possible parameter would be to compare the present-day defence cooperation to what existed a decade ago. A relevant question, however, is whether this cooperation has potential for expansion and diversification in future.

Economic Cooperation is a vast area covering trade, investment, energy, infrastructure and other joint projects. Trade grew from \$424 million in 2004–5 to \$1.2 billion in 2009–10. Thus the target of \$1 billion, set in my time as ambassador for the year 2007–08, was achieved after a two-year delay. A closer look indicates that the trade balance in the ratio of 5:1 is unfavourable to India. While in 2009–10 Myanmar's exports to India were valued at over \$1 billion, India's exports amounted to \$194 million only. This is an indicator

of the neglect of the Myanmar market by Indian businesses, a lacuna that needs effective and speedy correction.

India Inc. has also been lagging behind when it comes to investing in Myanmar. After many studies and investigations, it is evident that several areas such as pharmaceuticals, fertilizers, cement, manufacturing, agro-processing and small industry offer attractive potential for green-field investments and joint ventures. During Than Shwe's visit, Minister for Science and Technology U Thaung observed frankly, at an interaction arranged by FICCI (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry) in Delhi, that the Indian business community was taking "too long to come, unlike China and ASEAN countries". This illustrates the need for a frank examination of what is holding India Inc. back and what kind of business and investment promotion should be undertaken jointly in future.

Projects executed by Indian companies in recent years cover a variety of sectors such as roads, railways, telecommunication, automotive, energy and remote sensing. Construction and upgrading of the Tamu–Kalemyo–Kalewa road has been completed. India will be undertaking the construction/upgrading of the Rhi-Tiddim in Myanmar. RITES has been assisting Myanmar in improving its railway transport system. ISRO (Indian Space Research Organization) set up and subsequently upgraded a data processing centre in Myanmar for remote sensing applications. The Tatas have set up a turbo-truck assembly plant with assistance from a line of credit by the Indian government. Earlier, a project for high-speed link in thirty-two Myanmar cities was completed by the telecommunication company TCIL (Telecommunications Consultants India Limited). Three leading companies – OVL (ONGC Videsh Limited), GAIL and Essar – have been active in the energy sector. A host of other smaller projects too have been completed to the satisfaction of the Myanmar side.

A major flagship project under construction is the Kaladan multi-modal transit transport project, for which construction commenced in December 2010. It aims to link Kolkata and other East Indian ports through coastal shipping to Sittwe on the Arakan coast in Myanmar and provide further connection through the Kaladan river route and road to Mizoram on the Indian side. Hydroelectric power projects under discussion/study/investigation are Tamanthi and Shwezaye in the Chindwin river valley. Further, the Trilateral Highway project, with the objective to link Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand through Myanmar, has been under discussion/investigation for quite some time.

Although the authorities concerned have not released figures of expenditure on or investment in these projects, a rough calculation might show that in the past decade the Indian government and public sector companies have invested, spent and committed a cumulative sum of nearly \$500 million on the entire basket of projects, excluding those still in the discussion/investigation phase.

Other Cooperation is an important pillar too, notable for its diversity and capability in terms of influencing people's lives and enhancing their productive skills. Capacity building and human resource development have emerged as a point of principal focus, judged by the developments in the past five years. Under the highly successful Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme and related schemes, over two hundred Myanmar nationals have been receiving training in diverse programmes in institutions of excellence in India, with full funding being provided by the Indian side.

However, considering Myanmar's needs, the ITEC facility was considered inadequate. Through concerted efforts and guided by a long-term vision, the two governments have collaborated successfully to establish and operate four India-Myanmar Centres, each relating to enhancement of information technology (IT) skills, entrepreneurship development, English language training and industrial training. These have already shown their worth through their popularity in Myanmar and their ability to train hundreds of young people every year. This innovative approach has demonstrated the vast potential for further cooperation in this sector. India's economic success today is largely due to its capability to produce a massive number of engineers, medical, management, IT, and other professionals. On the other hand, Myanmar's development is hampered by paucity of trained manpower. It stands to reason therefore that this cooperation should be expanded significantly within a short timeframe.

Apart from education and capacity building, culture, tourism and other means of strengthening people-to-people relations have been employed with imagination and vigour by the two countries to deepen their friendship. Media exchanges may need further attention. In this context, the role and contribution of the Indian diaspora in Myanmar should also be kept in view. Through dialogue and cooperation at the government level, efforts should continue to address such grievances as they may have.

Government- and business-level relations have a chance to get real momentum only when people-to-people relations are revitalized. In the post-election era in Myanmar, both sides have an unprecedented opportunity to carry this cooperation forward in a decisive manner. More importantly, human

interest stories about these exchanges and flourishing cultural links need to be told on a much larger scale, especially in India, in order to create a solid constituency that supports further investment of time, effort, energy and money in building closer links with Myanmar. This is a challenge for those involved in practising public diplomacy in both countries. They need to be urged to meet it head on.

Key Issues for the Relationship

In order to examine and suggest the way forward, there is need to assess the impact of a few critical issues facing the two countries as they contemplate the future of their relations in both bilateral and regional context.

First, India needs to study and comprehend the nature, degree and effect of political change following the elections in November 2010. Between those who claim that Myanmar has now embarked on a new journey with new leaders operating under a new Constitution, and those who dismiss the recent changes as illusory and inconsequential in establishing genuinely democratic governance, there exists a middle ground which is waiting to be explored. Gradually, a middle view has emerged which suggests that Myanmar is now in a position to shift from direct military rule to a form of limited or guided democracy; that this presents a new opportunity creating space, hitherto nonexistent, for new political forces and actors, opposition groups, provincial ethnic leaders, and civil society; and that this window of opportunity should be used optimally and pragmatically.

This view needs to be considered in the context of an ongoing debate in India about the wisdom and effectiveness of its Myanmar policy. The realist school, generally happy with the essence of the existing policy, criticizes the idealists, i.e. supporters of the pro-democracy movement, for opposing pragmatism. The idealist school, whose views are frequently reflected in the media and on the seminar circuit, remains strongly critical of the Government of India for abandoning the democratic forces in Myanmar. When President Barack Obama exhorted India, in his celebrated speech before the joint session of the Indian Parliament in November 2010, to do more for human rights and democracy in Myanmar, the idealists cheered, whereas the realists jeered, dismissing it as an exercise in hypocrisy and double standards.

The existing policy faces serious criticism on another ground, namely the rapidly expanding influence of China in Myanmar, especially in regard to political and defence cooperation, diplomatic coordination and economic convergence, especially in energy, transport, mining, manufacturing and

infrastructure sectors. This may be regarded as the second critical issue facing Myanmar-India relations. In view of important developments pertaining to Myanmar-China relations in recent years that culminated in the recent announcement of “a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership”, questions are being raised in India. It is, of course, a country’s right to determine its foreign policy, but even usually well-informed people are anxious and curious. They are wondering what Myanmar really wants and, particularly, whether it wishes to maintain a calibrated balance in its relations with its partners in ASEAN and with China, Japan, South Korea and India.

The third issue pertains to sanctions: whether they should continue, be lifted completely, or modified. As a matter of principle, India has been opposed to sanctions and generally believes that they do not work. The current discussion involving the new government in Myanmar and its Western interlocutors on the future of sanctions is being monitored in India with close interest. Its outcome could have a bearing on future initiatives for Myanmar-India economic relations.

The fourth relevant issue, in this context, is undoubtedly the emerging thinking within ASEAN towards the political questions facing Myanmar. At the Jakarta Summit, ASEAN, while “reiterating support to steady progress and political developments”, decided to postpone its decision on Myanmar’s request to chair ASEAN in 2014. It is no secret that Indians feel a special affinity with ASEAN and are in the process of enhancing the country’s relations with it across the whole spectrum. Indian policymakers would no doubt be listening very carefully to both Myanmar and other ASEAN nations as this essentially intra-ASEAN issue gets resolved in due time.

Finally, Myanmar-India relations will also be influenced in future by the kind of importance and priority New Delhi accords to economic development of India’s North-East, for this is inextricably linked to the question of security, stability and development in the border region, i.e. on both sides of the boundary. This is where Myanmar’s importance as India’s immediate neighbour remains very high. A widespread view in eastern India, that Myanmar should be involved more extensively with the implementation of India’s LEP, would need to be factored in.

Prospects

Taking into consideration the changed political context and potential for further political progress in Myanmar, it should be worthwhile, in my assessment, for India to consider taking new initiatives. Contacts with the new Parliament

should be started by inviting a parliamentary delegation representing both houses to India. Steps should be taken to arrange participation of Myanmar members of Parliament and parliamentary officials in special training programmes on parliamentary procedures and practices run in New Delhi. The two ruling parties, Indian National Congress and USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party), could also consider a mid-level exploratory dialogue, and this channel can be used to discuss ideas how inclusive governance should be improved further. In due course, exchanges at provincial political level should also be encouraged selectively.

Moving beyond politics, much benefit could accrue if two other types of interaction and linkages could be considered: one, between civil society organizations, and two, involving the strategic communities of the two countries. The authorities can perhaps begin by starting a periodic dialogue between Indian experts in Myanmar and Myanmar experts in India and encourage them to discuss mutual concerns and come up with new ideas for the future evolution of the relationship.

At government level, there is scope for further expansion of economic cooperation, particularly in enhancing Indian investments and expanding the basket of development projects.

Further, both governments should look for practical ways to augment their implementing capabilities, reduce response time, and improve monitoring mechanisms. They should also critically examine why business-to-business exchanges have still not reached the optimal level.

High-level visits will no doubt continue to be exchanged. When the timing is right, a visit by the President of Myanmar to India too should be considered.

Conclusion

As the foregoing analysis demonstrates, Myanmar-India relations, against a long historical background, have developed considerably. Progress in the past decade has been particularly remarkable. Developments in 2010 and early 2011 clearly necessitate a constructive reappraisal. Stronger and more diversified Myanmar-India relations will not only promote mutual benefit, they will also be hugely beneficial for the region as a whole. However, it is time for Myanmar, under the new government, to indicate to the world the scope of enhancing inclusive governance at home as well as the real contours of its Asia policy, especially whether it will be based on a calibrated balance. Besides, Myanmar's friends would hope that it raises the profile of its public

diplomacy in a critical capital such as New Delhi.

In short, the way forward in Myanmar-India relations will be moulded, to a considerable extent, by Myanmar in the new era, and the two countries drawing appropriate lessons from the past.
