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## A strategic assessment of Indian Myanmar relations

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### Abstract

India and Myanmar relations hold historical significance since the existence of the both countries. The economic defence trade relations were seen with long existence. This study was carried to explore the India Myanmar relations. The study mainly focuses on the relations on the basis of economic and defence cooperation. The study was descriptive in nature. The results of the study reveal that India and Myanmar has been increasingly engaged in cross border trade and economic cooperation. The shift in India foreign policy and economic orientation from “look east to act east” policy has greatly contributed to the emergency of cross border regions along with the borders of India and Myanmar.

**Keywords:** strategic assessment, economic cooperation, defence cooperation, Indian Myanmar relations

### Introduction

India and Myanmar relationship officially got underway after the treaty of friendship was signed in 1951, after which the foundation for the more meaningful relation was established during PM Rajiv Gandhi visit in 1987. India and Myanmar have traditionally much in common with culture, historical, ethnic and religious ties. In addition to sharing a long geographical border with Myanmar. India and Myanmar were historically part of the extended British Empire in Asia. Since the two countries became independent at the end of World War II, relations between them have by and large been friendly. At the outset Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru and U N worked closely with each other in the area of economic development. India even provided some military assistance to Myanmar, and both were active members of the Non-Aligned Movement. However, relations between the two became strained in 1962. India strongly opposed the imposition of military dictatorship in Myanmar by General Ne Win and supported the prodemocracy forces. The Ne Win regime adopted an anti-Soviet stance at a time when relations between India and the Soviet Union were burgeoning, refused to join the Commonwealth of Nations, and withdrew from the Non-Aligned Movement in 1979. Relations between India and Myanmar did improve from 1988 onward, however, although some tensions remained. India continued to sympathize with prodemocracy groups and awarded the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding to Aung San Suu Kyi in 1993, by which time she had already become persona non grata to the Myanmar government. The isolationist strategy adopted by the State Law and Order Restoration Council further hampered the renewal of full relations between the two countries. After 1993, however, India’s policy toward Myanmar was reviewed and India adopted a more pragmatic and less moralistic stance. This purposeful shift from an idealistic foreign policy to one that was firmly anchored in realpolitik has been the driving force behind the improvement of relations between the two countries. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao’s focus on the Southeast Asian nations reflected India’s growing interest in its regional neighbourhood. Former Indian foreign secretary Shyam Saran explains India’s quest to reach out to its Asian neighbours in these words: “Proximity is the most difficult and testing among [the] diplomatic challenges a country faces. We have, therefore, committed ourselves to giving the highest priority to closer political, economic and other ties with our neighbours in South Asia”. Geography imparts a unique position to India in the geo-politics of the Asian continent, with our footprint reaching well beyond South Asia and our interests straddling across different sub-categories of Asia or be it East Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia or South-East Asia. India’s Look East policy was targeted at opening markets in Southeast Asia and cooperation with Myanmar was important for its implementation.

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That Bangladesh was a recalcitrant partner in this endeavour further highlighted the importance of Myanmar. Without this shift in policy, the growth of several of India's north-eastern states would have been hindered by the attendant risk of fuelling on-going insurgencies. India's interest in Myanmar and the Look East policy also reflect growing international interest in Asia as an engine of economic growth in the twenty-first century. Myanmar supports India's quest for a place in the sun and is comfortable with India's increasing engagement with its immediate and extended neighbourhood. For the Myanmar government, the additional purpose of addressing problems in the north-eastern states comes as a welcome part of the deal.

**Statement of the research problem:** The research problem under investigation is itemized as:

### **A strategic assessment of Indian Myanmar relations**

#### **Purpose of study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategic perspective relationship between India and Myanmar. However, this study mainly focuses on the relations on the basis of economic and defence cooperation.

#### **Methodology and procedure**

The research found suitable to adopt descriptive survey method for carrying this research problem.

#### **Collection of data**

The investigator has collected both primary and secondary data for generalisations the results of the study.

#### **Rationale of the study**

The Indian government supports national reconciliation and a gradual return to democracy in Myanmar even as it balances its concerns for human rights violations with its strategic interests. In the words of an Indian Ministry of Defence report, "Myanmar's adoption of a new Constitution, following referendum in May 2008, paves the way for elections in 2010. India desires a stable Myanmar with an inclusive and broad based national reconciliation process, including [engagement with] ethnic groups". However, there are many vociferous critics of the Indian government's Myanmar policy. According to one prominent Indian scholar, "India's stand on the Myanmar question is neither spontaneous, nor ethically grounded, nor even driven by an internal process of policy deliberation. It is impelled largely by international pressure, spearheaded by the United States. This does not speak of a proactive approach worthy of an emerging power within independent foreign policy orientation." There is dissatisfaction in India over Myanmar's treatment of the minority Indian population in the country. The Indian population in Myanmar is considered an alien minority, despite its origins in migration that occurred during colonial rule in the late 1800s. Attitudes toward the Indian population have traditionally ranged from considering them a backward and impoverished community to hatred for the moneylenders who became influential landlords. Myanmar's citizenship laws deny Indians their rightful claim to a position in society and to compensation for property seized from them under land reforms programs. Despite the growing tide of disenchantment among the Indian diaspora from Myanmar, the Indian government has shown little interest in

intervening on their behalf with the Myanmar junta. The Indian government has had to face its share of brickbats for maintaining the status quo in its relations with Myanmar. It maintained public silence after the verdict in Aung San Suu Kyi's trial was announced in July 2009 sentencing her to three years imprisonment (later commuted to eighteen months of house arrest). The Indian government's position was maintained despite the fact that several members of ASEAN, though generally disposed to remaining silent on any issues concerning Myanmar, called on the regime to release Suu Kyi and to hold free and fair elections. Even China endorsed UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon's request to meet both the military regime and Aung San Suu Kyi in July 2009, although the military regime rejected the request. Nevertheless, like other ally-elected governments, the Indian government would like to see an early return to democratic rule in Myanmar and a substantial improvement in governance. The economic sanctions imposed by the Western democracies have not deterred the military regime. It appears from recent developments that there is a growing realization on the part of the sanctioning authorities that it would be better to use a mix of policy tools in which sanctions may remain but a process of dialogue with the people and the military regime is initiated. The United States government should consider encouraging the member nations of ASEAN to promote better governance in Myanmar rather than punishing both Myanmar and its ASEAN partners for Myanmar's continuing membership in the ASEAN community. Sanctions have always been a blunt policy instrument. A sanctions regime does little but limit the ability of both parties involved to work amicably within the international community to bring about constructive reform. Incremental adjustments in policy must be made from time to time. If given some encouragement, the military regime may be amenable to winding down some of the harsh practices it has used. India has recently realized that a foreign policy based solely on occupying the moral high ground on every international issue—like the policy it followed during the early decades after its independence—is not a sustainable one now and those economic and strategic objectives must sometimes override other objectives. Henceforth, although the Indian government supports democracy as a system of government in principle, it does not interfere in the internal affairs of other sovereign nations. While New Delhi is interested in seeing the political situation in Myanmar normalize, Myanmar is keen to keep its ties with New Delhi on an even keel to further consolidate its policy of regional engagement, reduce its growing dependence on China, and counter pressure from the West in the form of sanctions. India's long-term strategic interests may well be better served by a democratic regime in Myanmar. However, the Indian government must maintain a pragmatic foreign policy and help build democratic institutions in Myanmar in ways that do not embarrass the military junta. Constructive engagement through official and diplomatic channels not confrontation is the key to weaning the military regime away from totalitarian measures. The strategic and security interests of India justifiably outweigh the domestic concerns within India favouring Myanmar's return to democracy. The solution lies not in attempting to export democracy to Myanmar but in trying to nudge the ruling military regime toward democracy through regional engagement involving all stakeholders. Therefore, keeping the above discussion

under consideration, the investigator has explored the economic and defence cooperation as under:

### **Economic cooperation**

A Memorandum of Understanding on Peace and Tranquility in Border Areas was signed by India and Myanmar in January 1994. This document commits both countries to hold talks at the joint secretary and home secretary levels every year, alternately in each country. Thus far, fifteen meetings at the joint secretary level and fourteen at the home secretary level have been held. Relations have been further cemented through regular high-level visits, notably Senior General Maung Aye's inaugural visit in January 2000 and, most recently, his visit in April 2008. The current chair of the State Peace and Development Council, Senior General than Shwe, visited India in October 2004. This was the first visit to India by a Myanmar head of state in twenty-five years. From the Indian side, Vice President Shekhawat visited Myanmar in November 2003; and President A. P. J. Abdul Kalam's visit in March 2006 was the first visit by an Indian head of state to Myanmar since Rajiv Gandhi was prime minister in 1987. More recently, Vice President Hamid Ansari visited Yangon in February 2009. The foreign ministers of Myanmar and India have met frequently throughout the last decade. During these visits, several memorandums of understanding and agreements have been signed.

### **Defence cooperation**

Defence cooperation between India and Myanmar is based on mutual interests and national security considerations. It has been marked by regular exchanges of high-level visits and some bilateral military exercises. The Indian chief of army staff, General V.P. Malik, met with his Myanmar counterpart, Senior General Maung Aye, in Yangon and Shillong in 2000. Since then, visits by top officials of all three military services have been a regular feature. Major visits include those by Vice Admiral Soe Thane, commander-in-chief of the Myanmar navy, in April 2007, and Admiral Sureesh Mehta, the chief of naval staff for the Indian navy, in May 2007, General Deepak Kapoor, the present chief of army staff, visited Myanmar in October 2009, as did his predecessor, General J.J. Singh, in November 2005. Beginning in 2004, Myanmar, along with other nations in the Asia-Pacific region, has participated in the annual multilateral "Milan" naval exercises and interactions in the Indian Ocean. Cooperation in the field of counterinsurgency operations overrides other factors in determining the contours of India's strategic engagement with Myanmar. The insurgents operating in the north-eastern Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram have ethnic links with the tribal people on the Myanmar side of the border. Acts of terrorism initiated by these groups, who claim to represent the tribal people on both sides of the border, have been on the rise since the 1990s, necessitating good relations between the militaries of the two countries. Incidents of drug trafficking and macro terrorism in the north-eastern states have also been increasing. To minimize the potentially dangerous manifestations of drug abuse, India needs to play a proactive role as a balancer and a stabilizer and must ensure that its concentration on traditional security does not divert attention to non-traditional security challenges. India must work with neighbouring countries to create both regional

and sub-regional institutions to address these challenges. There is an increasing realization on the part of New Delhi that the insurgent groups cannot be dealt with by military means alone. Joint counterinsurgency operations have been conducted for quite some time. In April-May 1995, the Indian and Myanmar armies conducted a successful joint military operation, codenamed Operation Golden Bird, against north-eastern insurgent groups including the United Liberation Front of Asom, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, and the People's Liberation Army (Manipur). Forty insurgents were killed and a huge cache of arms was recovered. In November 2001 the Myanmar army raided several Manipuri rebel bases, rounded up almost 200 rebels, and recovered 1,500 guns. General than Shwe, during his visit in 2004, had assured India of action against insurgents operating from Myanmar, and the Tatmadaw conducted additional operations against them in 2005 and 2006. The Tatmadaw launched another military offensive against insurgent groups in 2007. In 2008 a Memorandum of Understanding on Intelligence Exchange Cooperation was signed that enables both countries to exchange real-time "actionable" intelligence to deal effectively with insurgents in the border region. India has offered, and Myanmar accepted, battlefield training as well as uniforms for Myanmar's armed forces. India also leased a helicopter squadron to the Myanmar military and offered to help maintain its existing Russian military equipment. Since 2003, joint naval maneuvers and a number of port calls have been conducted. Armed forces officers from Myanmar in various ranks have received training from the Indian military in various sites over the years. India's Assam Rifles paramilitary force has the dual role of maintaining internal security in the north-eastern states and guarding the Indo-Myanmar border. The Indo-Tibetan Border Police also covers the Myanmar border region as part of its duties. Both these paramilitary and police forces work in close cooperation with Myanmar counterparts. India has supplied military hardware to Myanmar but has limited its transfers mainly to small arms. Myanmar's quartermaster general, Lieutenant General Thiha Thura Tin Aung Myint, a member of the State Peace and Development Council, visited India in April 2007 and presented a shopping list for military hardware to the chief of army staff. Lieutenant General Tin wanted infantry weapons and ammunition in return for providing help in flushing out Indian insurgents. Small arms like assault rifles, light machine guns, and side arms figured prominently on the Myanmar list. India has extended immense help to Myanmar during natural disasters and has usually been the first to deliver humanitarian relief. In the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, India launched Operation Sahayata (Operation Help). Two Indian navy ships and two Indian air force aircraft were dispatched to aid the cyclone-impacted people of Myanmar. A large quantity of aid was provided in the form of medical supplies and emergency rations.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the growing tide of disenchantment among the Indian diaspora from Myanmar, the Indian government has shown little interest in intervening on their behalf with the Myanmar junta. The Indian government has had to face its share of brickbats for maintaining the status quo in its relations with Myanmar. The results of the study reveal that India and Myanmar has been have increasingly been

engaged in cross border trade and economic cooperation. The shift in India foreign policy and economic orientation from “look east to act east” policy has greatly contributed to the emergency of cross border regions along with the borders of India and Myanmar.

### Computing interest

During the entire research process, the investigator has not declared any conflict of interest.

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