

INDIA – MYANMAR RELATIONS: IS THERE A SHADOW OF CHINA?

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War ushered in a new era for the world and so did for India. India was left to think afresh as the reasoning and policies of the past could not apply in the new epoch. The Nehruvian foreign policies, in particular of non-alignment and staying away from bloc politics, were no longer applicable in the post-Cold War situation presented for India. With the start of the 1990's, the Soviet Union, diplomatic ally and trading partner of India, withered away with no communist political, military and economic counterpoise to China in the region; Chinese presence in India's east in Myanmar (known as Burma until June 1989) and Asia Pacific region grew substantially; while, India's political and economic crisis of mid-1991 took on worrisome proportions. These emerging developments around and within India compelled it to re-examine its domestic and geo-political policies for securing and enhancing its independence within and beyond the region. A thoughtful assessment brought to attention the eastward potential and gave birth to India's 'Look East Strategy.'

Theoretical framework

To understand the relations between India and Myanmar vis-a-vis China a theoretical framework has been applied to get a better understanding of the subject under study. The "Balance of Threat" theory will give an insight into the India-Myanmar relationship and the basis of alliance formation that India decided to act upon with not only its neighbour Myanmar but also with the Southeast Asian states against China's expanding interests in the neighbouring Myanmar and the region as a whole.

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The “balance of threat” theory was proposed by Stephen M. Walt in an article titled “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” published in the *International Security* journal in 1985. The theory basically modified the traditional balance of power theory of the realist school and also of Kenneth Waltz’s neorealist school of international relations by separating power from threat. The idea behind embracing this new concept was that Stephen Walt explored in detail the question, “what causes alignment?” Most of the scholarly work undertaken by researchers had ignored or was incomprehensible on this question of how states select their partners.

Explaining the concept Walt identifies important factors states take into consideration to evaluate the threat and its effects posed by states. The important hypotheses pointed out by Walt for alliance formations are:

**Balancing vs bandwagoning:
Alliance as a response to threat**

Stephen Walt beheld in the balance of threat theory that states’ alliance is determined by the *threat* they perceive from other states not the *power*. Although Walt holds that power is an important factor, yet to him it is not the only one. Instead of allying in response to power alone, states will ally with or against the most threatening power. Walt contends that when allying for balance against threat, the weak states are more likely to bandwagon in order to protect themselves. He argues that the more states view a rising state possessing these mentioned traits the more likely they are to consider it as a threat and take steps for balancing against its threat.⁽¹⁾ Different sources of threats are:

- a. **Aggregate power:** The greater a state’s total resources, i.e. population, industrial and military capability, technological prowess, etc., the greater a potential threat it can pose to others. So by itself, another state’s aggregate power may be a motive for balancing or bandwagoning.⁽²⁾
- b. **Proximate power:** States with geographical proximity pose a greater threat than those that are at distance. When a proximate power threat leads to bandwagoning, a familiar phenomenon of “sphere of influence” gets created. Small states neighbouring or bordering a great power may become so vulnerable that they choose to bandwagon instead of seeking balance.⁽³⁾
- c. **Offensive power:** States with large offensive capabilities are more likely to incite an alliance than those who are either militarily weak or only capable of defending. The immediate threats such capabilities pose compel states to balance by allying with others.⁽⁴⁾
- d. **Offensive intentions:** States that appear aggressive are likely to provoke others to balance against them while states with rather modest capabilities may also trigger a balancing response if they are perceived as aggressive. Here perceptions of intent play an important role in alliance choices. In short,

intentions, not power, are crucial. The more aggressive or expansionist a state appears, the more likely is it to trigger an opposing coalition.⁽⁵⁾

Ideology and alliance formation

Walt in his theory argues that ideological solidarity is important in alliance formation; yet it is just one factor among many. States expectedly follow their ideological preferences when they are already fairly secure. When they are faced with great danger, states take whatever allies they can get.⁽⁶⁾ When ideology calls for members to form a centralized movement, ideology will have a divisive role. Secondly, apparent significance of ideology can be exaggerated by the perceptions of statesmen and policies they adopt as a result. Hence, ideology does play a role in alliance choices but it is usually a subordinate one because reality may actually be quite the opposite. Security considerations actually take precedence while ideological alliances do not survive when pragmatic interests intrude.⁽⁷⁾

The instruments of alliance formation

States seeking alliance will employ specific policy instruments to attract others to their side. The use of such instruments rests upon implicit hypothesis about the relative effectiveness of such tactics. The most substantial instruments are “bribery” (foreign aid) and penetration.⁽⁸⁾

a) International bribery or foreign aid

The provision of economic or military assistance creates operative allies by communicating one’s favourable intentions, by evoking gratitude, so that the recipient becomes dependent on the donor. The premise is that more aid will result in stronger alliance. Foreign aid gives suppliers effective leverage over the recipients.⁽⁹⁾ Walt disagrees with the notion that foreign aid is the main cause of alignment or a powerful influence tool because it ignores the fact that military or economic assistance is offered and accepted only if both the parties agree that it is the only way for responding to a common threat. The conditions under which assistance is taken also need to be taken into account. Bribery gives supplier political leverage over recipient only when the supplier is the only available source of economic or military aid else leverage will be limited as recipient can obtain it elsewhere. Since recipients are weaker than suppliers, tough bargaining takes place. However, suppliers will be hesitant to cut off supplies so as not to make their allies insecure. If the recipient is vital to the donor then more aid is given and recipient is not put under pressure. That means client successfully manipulates the patron into providing increasing amount of support. The provision of aid can be self-defeating as it strengthens the client’s position and lessens the patron’s desires.⁽¹⁰⁾

b) Penetration

The final hypothesis concerns the effects of political penetration carried out by covert or indirect manipulation of one state’s political system by another. This is done through (i) public officials with divided loyalties, (ii) lobbying organizations may be used to alter policy decisions and public perceptions and

(iii) foreign propaganda, used to sway elite and mass behaviours. Penetration is more effective against open societies, when the objectives are limited, and the means are not intrusive.⁽¹¹⁾

The theory under discussion rightly applies to India in its relations with Myanmar and China. India felt threatened by the economic and military goals in its neighbouring Myanmar. Furthermore, India felt highly insecure because of what it perceived as China's expansionist maritime interests in India's domain through Myanmar. The theory in this situation elaborates the steps taken by the Indian government in revising its policies towards the neglected neighbour, Myanmar, and then forming alliance with the smaller Southeast Asian countries through ASEAN who shared similar threat perceptions over China's dominant status in the region. India used economic and military tools like that of China to bring Myanmar out of Chinese influence which Myanmar accepted willingly. The arguments and a detailed discussion in the paper further support and relate to the hypothesis and reasoning of balance put forward in the threat theory.

Main argument

The main argument of the paper is that India after the loss of the traditional international partner, the Soviet Union, at the end of the Cold War felt vulnerable and insecure over the growing influential presence of China across the border in Myanmar. India-Myanmar relations were at a standstill after the military coup in the latter and had turned antagonistic with China after the 1962 war. India brought a shift in its policies towards Myanmar and the eastern region as a whole to counter rising Chinese status both economically, militarily and in maritime matters in Myanmar. India felt threatened and found similar feelings among the eastern countries which favoured forming an alliance with it with ASEAN countries' support for balancing and countering the Chinese dominance. Though in pursuing its policy initiatives and moves for securing its interests, India still faces challenges and constraints, notably the tough competition from China in Myanmar.

A geo-strategic 'Golden Land'

Before shedding light on India-Myanmar relations and China's influence in the latter, it is pertinent to know why Myanmar so important to both Asian giants' foreign policy interests. Myanmar, historically known as a 'Golden Land', though unfortunately a hermitland, is uniquely placed in a geo-strategic location on the map of the world. Myanmar lies between two nuclear armed Asian giants, India and China, and at the crossroads of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia as a strategic bridge connecting the three vital regions.

From the perspective of Samuel Huntington, Burma straddles the fault lines of the Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian civilizations. It separates China from the Indian Ocean, and although does not dominate the major sea lines of communication (SLOCs) yet is closer to significant Indian Ocean shipping lanes that are crossed by active east-west commercial air-routes. This is the fourth

crucial connecting position it has had for centuries where foreign empires and invaders engaged in hegemonic struggles.⁽¹²⁾ Myanmar in its south links with the strategic Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal. It shares common borders with five resource-rich countries: Bangladesh 193km; China 2,185 km; India 1,463 km; Laos 235 km; and Thailand 1,800 km.⁽¹³⁾

Myanmar in the 1950s was considered an Asian domino by Western democracies that valued it as much as Vietnam and Thailand. Although after 1962 its strategic importance declined when it isolated itself from the international arena, yet in the 90s Myanmar once again emerged as a significant regional player, in particular vis-a-vis the neighbouring India and China as a result of the shift in the regional power balance. Given Myanmar's geo-strategic significance for both its neighbours, complex and competitive nature of the two rising Asian powers' interests in the energy, border security, maritime and economic sectors has been inevitable.

A historical overview of India-Myanmar relations

The Indian diaspora broadly spread across the neighbouring region worked out well for India by identifying and connecting itself with the host country. The British legacy of transporting a large number of Indian labourers to different parts of their empire including Myanmar (at that time known as Burma) in Southeast Asia helped India pursue its interests through reconnecting the lost ties with the host country. India not only has cultural and ethnic ties with Myanmar but also religious links with the country and the rest of the Asia Pacific region. Buddhism, originating in India, spread towards the eastern region creating a sentimental connection between India and Myanmar and several other Asian countries.⁽¹⁴⁾

The personal friendship between democratic prime ministers Nehru and U Nu formed the basis for cordial ties between the two countries from 1948 to 1962. After General Ne Win's military coup toppled the democratic government in Burma in 1962, hostility between the two states began to simmer, mainly because of military regime's nationalizing of economic and trade sector. Consequently, more than 200,000 people of Indian origin were forcibly sent back home. These people, who were Burmese-Indians and not Indian-Indians, were sadly subjected to harsh treatment in Burma.

Another turning point in bilateral relations came with the Indian support for the struggle for restoration of democracy in Myanmar led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and India's official criticism of the bloody crackdown on democratic voices against the military coup in 1988. The Indian government fully supported the democratic forces and implemented a clearly defined refugee policy that not only welcomed Myanmar's political refugees and provided them shelter but also gave them liberty to criticize Myanmar's military rulers — the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) — through All-India Radio (AIR). India's welcoming the Nobel Peace Prize award to Aung San Suu Kyi in October 1991 led Myanmar to condemn it for instigating insurgency.⁽¹⁵⁾

Bilateral relations saw further tensions after 1988 when Myanmar armed forces stepped up military campaigns in the region bordering India's Northeast. Military action along the border with Nagaland drove thousands of refugees into India, which protested and called for steps for the return of Burmese nationals.⁽¹⁶⁾ Both got engaged in fuelling and financing cross-border insurgencies in each other's troubled regions: the Burmese army supported Indian insurgent groups in Nagaland and Manipur whereas India gave its clandestine support to Burmese democratic politicians and well-trained ethnic rebel groups like the Kachin insurgents.⁽¹⁷⁾

Lengthening Shadow of China over Myanmar & Indian fears

As stated above, in the post-Cold War environment a politically and economically vulnerable India felt deep concerns over what it perceived as the growing Chinese hegemonic ambitions in South, Southeast, Central and Inner Asia, China's growing presence in Myanmar and the emerging economic tigers in the east. The overpowering and evergrowing relationship of China with the military government in Myanmar, India's nextdoor eastern neighbour, for the first time compelled the Indian government to come out of their foreign policy constraints.

It was in Myanmar more than anywhere else that India felt threatened because of what it perceived as China's military domination. Already China's support for Pakistan in India's west had put it under pressures and China's closer military presence on the eastern front in Myanmar added to India's strategic concerns.⁽¹⁸⁾ India felt as if being encircled by China on four fronts, China's land frontiers; its land links with India's neighbours; its maritime presence in the Indian Ocean; and its maritime links with India's neighbours, in other words, power projection from China itself and through its 'strategic proxies'.⁽¹⁹⁾

A closer look at the relations between Beijing and Rangoon (old capital of Myanmar, later renamed Yangon) reveals the sense of strategic insecurities haunting Indian policy makers at the time. China-Myanmar relations go a long way back as a democratic Myanmar was one of the foremost countries that recognized the People's Republic of China in 1949 thus seeking friendly bilateral relations. Both countries not only signed their first trade agreement in 1954 but also signed a boundary treaty in 1960.

After patchy phases of the 1960s and 70s, both countries settled on founding a strong relationship. During his visit to Beijing in 1977 Gen Ne Win signed a \$63 million aid agreement for various projects⁽²⁰⁾ in Myanmar. Further visits came in 1980. Chinese President Li Xiannian visited Myanmar in 1985.⁽²¹⁾ The military crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in Tatmadaw, Myanmar, in 1988 and in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989 followed by clamping of sanctions by international community on both countries, compelled China to look at its Asian neighbours as an alternative. Myanmar on the other hand, strategically located and rich with energy resources, became economic and military interest of China,⁽²²⁾ as it abandoned decades of isolationism by

strengthening bilateral ties with China,⁽²³⁾ while India's relations with the country gradually entered a period of suspension.

The cooperation began with concrete gains for both sides in many explorative areas. Myanmar sits on vast energy resources; it has gas reserves which due to sanctions were only exportable to its neighbours, and China has been one huge market as its economic growth depends to a large extent on energy imports. China by 2011 had been third largest trading partner of Myanmar and largest foreign investor. China has access to an oil pipeline that runs to Kunming, capital of its Yunnan province.⁽²⁴⁾

As border trade flourished on both sides Myanmar signed an agreement to obtain arms estimated at about \$1.4 billion, while China in exchange gained a contract to build port facilities, an opening to the Indian Ocean. As for cooperation in defence, Myanmar received modern weaponry systems, arms and equipments ranging from light to medium tanks, APCs, F-7 fighters, patrol vessels, anti-aircraft artillery, grenade launchers to multiple-launch rocket systems and communication equipments,⁽²⁵⁾ mostly accompanied with technical training programmes. China also helped Myanmar in upgrading defence industries by building small factories and facilities for naval improvements.⁽²⁶⁾

India got alarmed when China installed in Myanmar a maritime reconnaissance and electronic intelligence station on Great Coco Island in the Bay of Bengal, along with a base on Small Coco Island that the Chinese army was building in the Alexandra Channel between the Indian Ocean and the Andaman Sea north of India's Andaman Islands. These two islands, leased to China since 1994, are located at a crucial point on traffic routes between the Bay of Bengal and the Strait of Malacca. The facility can monitor regional military activities, mainly air and naval activities, in the eastern parts of Bay of Bengal, and India's strategically important tri-service military facilities, its naval and missile launch facilities on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Great Coco Island station, with antenna tower, radar sites and other electronic facilities that form a comprehensive SIGINT collection facility, was in operation by 70 Chinese naval personnel by mid-1993 and by 1994 it was ready to be used.⁽²⁷⁾

Another apprehension for the Indian policymakers that challenges India's primacy in the region is the strategic maritime expansion of China in the Indian Ocean by partaking in the civil and military infrastructure developing programmes in Myanmar. Chinese companies associated with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have been involved in constructing port facilities at Sittwe and Kyaukpyu on the Bay of Bengal, Bassein and Hainggyi Island in the Irrawaddy Delta, Mergui in southern Myanmar, and at Yangon. Some commentators suggest that these ports may not only handle increasing flow of trade goods from southern China, but could also be used as forward operating bases for the PLA Navy (PLAN). The Chinese intelligence facility on Zadetkyi Kyun reportedly includes an earth satellite station that Indian officials believe is capable of keeping contact with Chinese submarines operating in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea.⁽²⁸⁾ Hence it is debated in India that China's "string of pearls" strategy aims to encircle India militarily in the Indian Ocean in case of a conflict between the two.⁽²⁹⁾

The airfield construction projects, with Chinese assistance in north and north-western Myanmar, have alarmed Indian security establishment as there are nine airfields and one of these, Bhamo, close to China's southern border, is said to be 'clustered in a zone running north to south adjacent to Myanmar's border with India'.⁽³⁰⁾ Until recently almost 80 per cent of Myanmar's defence equipment was coming from China.⁽³¹⁾ Myanmar used the China card by extracting maximum gains and China used Myanmar's isolationism to maximize its diplomatic, economic, military and maritime interests in Myanmar and beyond.

'Look East' Policy: A strategic shift in New Delhi's vision

The Chinese shadow over Myanmar and a potential strategic threat to India's future security and national interests led India to reverse its policies and look towards the East. India had relatively kept away from Myanmar once the relations got soured, the reason being India's ruling elites getting too much concentrated on the Western bloc and ignoring the underdeveloped neighbour. Both India and South East Asia were on opposing sides of the Cold War divide. Besides, India's economic policies were protectionist and insular when it came to choosing trading partners while Myanmar had closed itself to the rest of world. Therefore, Indian foreign policy lacked crucial insight into the closest opportunities that Asian neighbour could have provided despite so much shared historical baggage.⁽³²⁾ By the time India realized the strategic importance of the resource-rich Myanmar and its role as a gateway to broader economic prospects, and no longer ignored rising Chinese influence there and its assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region that had impacts on Indian security, New Delhi had lost its strong foothold in Myanmar.

The new world without the bipolar East-West divisions presented India with a realistic perspective that discouraged treating South Asia and Southeast Asia as separate strategic theatres. Hence keeping in mind the domestic and regional changes Indian prime minister V.P. Narasimha Rao broadened New Delhi's strategic vision according to shifting world paradigm.⁽³³⁾ The Narasimha Rao government introduced a fundamental change in the foreign policy to what is popularly known as "Look East Policy" in 1991. I. K. Gujral explains this policy as: "What 'look east' really means is that an outward looking India is gathering all forces of dynamism, domestic and regional, and is directly focusing on establishing synergies with a fast consolidating and progressive neighbourhood to its East in Mother Continent of Asia."⁽³⁴⁾

Basically the essence of the policy was that India should find more and more linkages with the eastern neighbours as part of realpolitik where it will not only get its economic integration interests served but also raise India's status in the evolving global economic world. Accordingly, in this context India pursued a two-pronged strategy. First, it brought a notable shift in its Myanmar policy to counterbalance Chinese weight there by following a constructive engagement policy. India abandoned its earlier stance of isolating Myanmar's military regime by distancing itself from human rights and democracy stance to take

Myanmar out of Chinese influence. Secondly, India began to look for common interests with Southeast Asian countries that shared Indian threat perception about China.

Indo-Myanmar re-connects

After a bumpy diplomatic restart between the two neighbours in the early 1990s, a real swing came in 1998 when Indian foreign secretary K. Ragnath visited Myanmar to materialize Narasimha Rao government's objectives. He discussed issues concerning strategic cooperation on internal security, border management and border trade prospects, curbing of drug trafficking and smuggling. These issues were of utmost importance to India as the poorly shaped and underdeveloped Northeastern states of India were obstructing the strategic interests connected with Myanmar and beyond in countering Chinese initiatives. Myanmar's foreign minister Win Aung in return visited India after more than 15 years.⁽³⁵⁾

Hence, frequent exchange of high-level official visits began to take place that contributed to reconnection of linkages. The Indian government formed cordial cooperative ties with the military ruler in Myanmar. In November 2003, Indian vice-president Bahiron Singh, the highest ranking Indian official since Rajiv Gandhi's 1987 visit, commenced a five-day visit to Myanmar. Myanmar's senior General Than Shwe, chairman of the state peace and development, paid a state visit to India in 2004. It was the first head of state level visit from Myanmar in 24 years and high-level interaction in 17 years. As a sequel, Indian president Abdul Kalam paid a visit to Myanmar in 2006 that made him the first-ever Indian president to visit the country. These high-ranking bilateral visits indicate the importance India gives to amiable relations with Myanmar.⁽³⁶⁾

At the time of the 2010 elections in Myanmar much of the international community criticized the military junta except India which remained silent. India has been very cautious in maintaining cordial ties with its neighbour so that it can lure it away from Chinese influence. India even warmly received senior General Than Shwe during his visit and the two governments signed security and economic pacts.⁽³⁷⁾ India encouraged the democratic transitional phase in Myanmar. After her release democratic icon Aung San Suu Kyi chose India as the first country to visit. Aung San Suu Kyi openly sought India's help for the democratization process of Myanmar and expectedly wants Myanmar to balance between India and China.⁽³⁸⁾ Diplomatic skills gained India an assurance from Myanmar that it would not allow anti-India bases on its soil.⁽³⁹⁾

New Delhi competently targeted resource-rich and developmental areas like socio-economic, energy and security related to both land and sea routes to make deeper inroads into Myanmar.

Trade & Development

India's four northeastern states — Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh border — Myanmar. This border linkage was translated into trade relations and sea route. Therefore, to attain first policy objective, Indo-

Myanmar Border Trade Agreement was signed in 1994 on the basis of equal and mutual benefits. The agreement was implemented by opening different cross-border customs posts for trade purposes in 1995, especially at Moreh in India (Manipur State) and Tamu in Myanmar; Zowkhathar in India (Mizoram State) and Rih in Myanmar. Later, both countries decided to convert this border trade into regular trade paving the way for trade at most favoured nation (MFN) rates for goods. A third border trade point was opened at Avakhung in India (Nagaland) and Leshi in Myanmar after it was decided during a Joint Trade Committee session in 2008. The committee also expanded the list of tradable to 40 items from an initial 22 products.⁽⁴⁰⁾

The bilateral trade increased more than 80 times, from US\$12.4 million in 1980-81, to a level of \$995 million in 2007-08.⁽⁴¹⁾ The fiscal year 2006-07 trade was 650 million US dollars while \$ 341.40 million in 2004-05. It had jumped to \$ 557.68 million in 2005.⁽⁴²⁾ The figure is expected to double to \$3 billion by 2015, from the current level of \$ 1.3 billion, on the back of free trade agreement.⁽⁴³⁾

Besides, trade many ambitious developmental projects for building roads, dams, hydroelectric schemes, banking links, cooperation in IT, textiles, transportation, etc. were undertaken by the Indian government in Myanmar. The most significant ones include the November 2003 offer of \$ 57 million by India to upgrade Myanmar's railway network.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The-165 km long Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road was built by India that connects with Tamu and Kalaymyo-Kalewa.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport project has been assisted by India that envisions road and inland waterways from Sittwe port in Myanmar to Mizoram. Another project is the upgrading of Rhi-Tiddim road (about 60 km) in Myanmar adjoining Mizoram; and some sections of Trilateral Highway project of about 1,360 km that connects Moreh (Manipur, India) to Mae Sot in Thailand through Myanmar.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Energy

Myanmar's vast energy reserves of oil and natural gas make it an attractive partner for both India and China due to their rising economic security needs. The oil and gas industry in Myanmar is said to be among the oldest ones though largely dominated by Asian companies, notably China.⁽⁴⁷⁾ As of a 2011 evaluation, Myanmar holds 2.1 billion barrels of oils and 25 trillion cubic feet of gas.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Hence, Indian interests and need urged India's ONGC Videsh Ltd. and Gas Authority of India Limited together to hold 30 per cent rewards in the exploration and production of gas in Myanmar's A1 and A3 offshore blocks located in the Sittwe area of the Arakan state. In fact India has been preparing a 1,400-km pipeline to link the Sittwe area with Jagdishpur-Haldia pipeline in Bihar.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Armaments

India joined the ranks of China by gradually supplying arms to Myanmar. Initially it supplied low-tech arms and armaments like transport planes, T-55 tanks, artillery ammunition and naval craft. However, with a visit

of all the three chiefs of Indian forces to Myanmar for building a better bond, India upgraded its export to supplying counterinsurgency helicopters, avionics upgrades and naval surveillance aircraft.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Challenges and Constraints

Since India's strategic goals of countering Chinese influence and making inroads through Myanmar into Southeast Asian region depends on establishing a secure and developed northeast region bordering with Myanmar, New Delhi has been trying to remove the irritants in border areas to move ahead in the region smoothly. Already bilateral collaboration suffered in the past because of delays and uncertainty that cost India productive cooperation in the hydrocarbon sector, where China benefited.⁽⁵¹⁾ Chief among these challenging irritants are:

Cross-border insurgency

India's North-East has become a constant base for various kinds of separatist movements and one main reason for the growth of such groups as mentioned earlier has been the cross-border support enjoyed by them. The issue is linked to historical and economic deprivation where Myanmar's insurgency like that of the Kachins grew largely out of World War II experience; with skilled warfare training and organizational capabilities they influenced armed groups of North-East India by training them in exchange for hefty sums. For armed groups to operate outside Myanmar due to cheap availability of arms and other goods supplied at high prices in India serves to improve their economic conditions. Therefore, it was a necessity for India, security being the chief concern, to tackle insurgent strongholds in its Northeastern border area with Myanmar. Both sides had agreed since 1995 to jointly fight insurgencies and undertake joint border fencing.⁽⁵²⁾

The continuous Indian pressures on curbing insurgency resulted in some positive outcome like joint military operations conducted by India and Myanmar, notably 'Operation Golden bird' (May 1995) and 'Operation Leech' (1996).⁽⁵³⁾ In January 2006 as well joint military operations against rebels inside Myanmar were conducted.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Moreover, an 18-member Myanmar delegation agreed to crack down on Indian insurgents bases followed by a pledge not to permit its territory to be used by Northeastern insurgents to target India. However, in December 2000, 198 Northeastern Indian insurgents were arrested from camps in Myanmar who were not extradited as New Delhi requested but were set free. Similarly, Meitei rebels of Manipur captured inside Myanmar were also released instead of being handed over to Indian authorities.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Such incidents show that past mistrust still prevails between India and Myanmar despite notable efforts in the past decade.

Drug trafficking & smuggling

Drug trafficking and Smuggling is linked to cross-border insurgency as the rebels make use of the porous border for such activities. An example is the dominant Naga insurgent group, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland

(NSCN), getting help from the Karen National Union (KNU) insurgent group in Myanmar for cross-border smuggling of small arms from Southeast Asia and Yunnan province in China via Myanmar to the North-East.⁽⁵⁶⁾ In 2006 a meeting was held between both sides home ministers where it was decided to set up a police liaison post at India- Myanmar border. The post meant to provide a daily interaction platform, joint interrogation of those arrested in drug related cases, etc., and information-sharing at field and national levels. The failure to check drug trafficking has led to funding of insurgencies by drug trade. A bilateral agreement was signed in 1993 to stop narcotics trafficking, though the smuggling still continues between India's northeastern states bordering Myanmar.⁽⁵⁷⁾

ASEAN and alliance

The second policy objective was realized by utilizing Myanmar as India's gateway to Southeast Asia or to the Association of South-East Asian Nations Alliance (ASEAN) countries. India had shared good relations with the ASEAN countries for a long time but that declined once India became more cordial with the Soviet Union; it resulted in political and diplomatic differences. The ASEAN countries distrusted the Soviet Union and so India was also seen suspiciously, especially after the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty of 1971. However, after the dissolution of the USSR India embarked on reviving its strategic and economic ties with ASEAN countries to counterbalance Chinese presence in the Indo-China region that India perceived as threatening its security and regional aspirations. And for that it had to rely on opening up to Myanmar.⁽⁵⁸⁾

The conscious change in India's economic policy opting for an outward-oriented economy with a realization of the importance of regionalism beyond South Asia was welcomed by the Southeast Asian countries. After the disintegration of the USSR, the Southeast Asian countries felt an imbalance of power in Asia due to the rise in China's power. One important consideration taken into account by the ASEAN in welcoming India into their ranks was their fears about China's rising power and its maritime spread into the South China Sea. These countries decided in guarding against Chinese expansion by setting up vital sealanes of communication as points such as Taiwan, Malacca, Sunda and Lombok Straits. Consequently, India with largest naval forces in the Indian Ocean together with its nuclear capabilities was deemed fit as a strategic partner to balance China's growing power in the region.⁽⁵⁹⁾

China is expected to achieve a high-class blue-water navy status by 2050 and Myanmar provides China access to the Pacific and Indian oceans. It was reported that China and Myanmar were interested in joint development of a deep-water port at Kyaukpyu on Ramree Islands in the Bay of Bengal and that raised India's concerns. Moreover, Chinese military installations at the Zadetkyi Island in southern Myanmar close to Indonesia's Sabang Island raised suspicions about perceived Chinese maritime ambitions in the Indian Ocean.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Jakarta also remains suspicious of what it sees as Beijing's extra-territorial ambitions. During the Cambodia conflict Thailand was uncomfortable with

Beijing's military presence in its western maritime coastal region. Therefore, China's strategic maritime interests had security implications not only for India, Indonesia, Thailand, and Japan but also for ASEAN as a whole.⁽⁶¹⁾

Prime Minister Narasimha Rao embarked on his mission seeking diplomatic relations with ASEAN countries by paying visits to these countries. During these visits he pointed out the possibility of India becoming a counterbalance to China in Asia. During Rao's visit to Vietnam in 1994, prime minister Vo Van Kiet appreciated India's 'stabilizing role' and suggested Vietnam looked upon India as helping counterbalance or dilute China's power.⁽⁶²⁾ Other ASEAN members also encouraged India's playing such a role during various diplomatic visits made by high Indian officials to these countries.

The growing complementarities of views led to acceptance of India as ASEAN's sectoral partner in early 1992 and full dialogue partner in July 1996.⁽⁶³⁾ Even after New Delhi got economically engaged with ASEAN and was actively participating in various projects to get a strong foothold within ASEAN and the region, India supported ASEAN's efforts for drawing Myanmar into its orbit to end its dependence on China. Myanmar is the only ASEAN country having land and sea borders with India. Interestingly, with the passage of time as relations with China grew deeper, a feeling of insecurity also started growing within the military junta over mounting Chinese presence in Myanmar. With Chinese assistance Myanmar had re-established its strategic position in the region. However, when ASEAN, especially Thailand, offered political and economic assistance, Myanmar grasped the opportunity by shifting its political stance of neutrality and economic autarky.⁽⁶⁴⁾

The first tangible step India took after joining the ASEAN was to set up a Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Project in 2000 that included ASEAN countries along with the newer members including Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. India looked at ASEAN as a platform for shaping up a multilateral security order in the Asia-Pacific region. For India to remain connected to Myanmar is crucial for its policies. India and ASEAN signed a Free Trade Agreement in August 2009 which covers 11 countries including Myanmar. Some Indian initiatives, such as ASEAN Regional Forum, India-ASEAN Summits, East Asia Summit, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral and Technical Cooperation (BIMSTEC) further provide avenues for mutual cooperation between India and Myanmar. India has been assisting India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project and also upgraded the Yangon-Mandalay Trunk line besides setting up an optical fibre link between Moreh and Mandalay.⁽⁶⁵⁾

India – China competition in the 21st century Myanmar

Myanmar's changing political state of affairs after the democratic opening has made Indian as well as Chinese interests vulnerable in the country. Both India and China have become more competitive seeking economic and strategic edge in the resource-rich Myanmar. There is a shift in Myanmar's dealings with both of them.⁽⁶⁶⁾ While China still enjoys a privileged position due

to its diversified investments in the country, Myanmar adopted a “counter-hedging strategy” by following an open-door policy where India entered the scene. However, presently it seems that it is exploiting the fears of both its neighbours to gain maximum benefit by giving them investment opportunities while at the same time their interests remain vulnerable to changing state of mind in Myanmar.⁽⁶⁷⁾

Engaged in a balancing act vis-a-vis India and China in its own way, Myanmar halted its decades old friend China’s \$3.6 billion hydroelectric project in Kachin state. The suspended Myitsone Dam project, being built by China power Investment, is one of the seven to be constructed on the Irrawaddy River to provide electricity to China’s Yunnan province. China, the biggest lender to Myanmar, invested \$10 billion during 2010-2011 fiscal year. Later the government sent a delegation to China to discuss the matter. Myanmar seeks support from New Delhi in the democratic reforms introduced by the military government. Hence, the goal of its balancing act of diplomacy is to cooperate with both as it needs both its neighbours support and partnership.⁽⁶⁸⁾

While India had been pouring millions in improving transport links in Myanmar, Chinese firms are equally spending billions on infrastructure building projects on energy pipelines. One significant competitive interest other than maritime of both India and China in Myanmar as mentioned earlier is energy where both countries have conflicting interests. China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in December 2008 signed a deal to buy natural gas from the Shwe fields and has starting constructing two major energy pipelines across Myanmar.⁽⁶⁹⁾

India had been looking for onshore and offshore gas blocks on Sittwe route which China gained access to, due to Bangladesh’s presence in between Southeast Asia and India’s Northeast region that created difficulties. Myanmar neglected the Arakan region, so India lost its connection with Arakan and China gained onshore blocks there. India has A1 and A3 energy blocks but Chinese interest lies in building a pipeline from A1 to A7 blocks from Myanmar to China. For this China needs to build deep sea water ports in western Arakan, which India was looking for control of these ports. India is forced to sell the 30 per cent energy stake A1 and A3 blocks to China because of absence of a proper pipeline link with Myanmar.⁽⁷⁰⁾

Water will become potential source of tension between India and China. All the major rivers of Asia, except for the Ganges, originate in the Tibetan plateau. Therefore, China’s control of the headwaters of the Indus, Mekong, Yangtze, Brahmaputra, and other rivers, which collectively serve nearly half of the world’s population, may become highest conflict point and challenge to the region. In particular, when Beijing has built dams on these major rivers for hydropower and irrigation. Already bedevilled by shadows of the 1962 war with China on the Indian psyche, if water geopolitics gets inflamed then interstate tensions, especially those popping up between India and China, might disrupt Asian economic connectivity.⁽⁷¹⁾

Myanmar has established close bilateral relations with both its neighbours, to the extent of having people-to-people contacts and exchange of

goods through border trade zone. However, India gets tough competition from China. In 2006 China-Myanmar trade reached \$721 million while India-Myanmar border trade was a mere \$17 million. In spite of the delays in Myitsone project China has not been pushed away from Myanmar. It's simply that Myanmar, gearing up for attracting Western investments, has altered the modus operandi of doing business and that alters the procedure for Chinese investors as well. Myanmar's U Thein Sein welcomes Chinese investment as it is very well known in Myanmar that China's role in the country remains dominant and is beneficial for it. Aung San Suu Kyi also encouraged continuing cordial relations with Beijing. This is what actually means by Myanmar's re-balancing of its foreign relations where foreign players along with China would be competing with each other in dealing with Myanmar.⁽⁷²⁾

A serious setback for India here is that while China has been able to either resolve or shelve its border disputes with Myanmar, India is still struggling with ongoing conflicts with its bordering countries besides the insurgency in its Northeast region that hampers border peace and trade. For instance, India has not so cordial relations with Bangladesh and that blocks its constructing a gas pipeline from Myanmar.⁽⁷³⁾

There are concerns that whatever developments occur in the bordering region of Myanmar have direct impact on India's Northeastern region. Such as the case of Manipur, situated near Sangaing division, northwestern border of Myanmar, which directly gets affected by whatsoever takes place because they share a very porous border and cross-border interaction among people is very active. A leader-in-exile of Myanmar's National League for Democracy, Dr. Tint Swe, said during a discussion at the Manipur Press Club that India's 'Look East' Policy was formulated to counter Chinese influence besides engaging the military junta in Myanmar to resolve ethnic unrest along the border areas. Dr. Swe said that India needed to take care of its Northeast before it looked beyond. "India needs to frame afresh its policies towards Myanmar taking into account the shifting policies and political system in Myanmar, he added.⁽⁷⁴⁾

India has been encouraged by Myanmar officials to assist them in political affairs, especially matters relating to democracy. It is presently conducting an e-government project to train government officials there.⁽⁷⁵⁾ However, despite positive developments between India and Myanmar and India and ASEAN, connectivity between them is still poor. The ASEAN countries are still not comfortable with the idea of advancing cooperation in defence and security areas due to the China factor. Major impediment between India and Myanmar is lack of development in India's Northeast region which is an integral part of India's Look East Policy as a key driving force and staging post for the policy. The continued insurgencies need to be resolved.⁽⁷⁶⁾

India has developed a workable relationship with China as there is a mutual sense about not confronting each other but both of them are preparing to face stiff competition from each other rather than a conflict. The increasing importance of maritime trade and energy security for both India and China has made it necessary to secure sealanes of communication (SLOC) in Southeast

Asia. India is dependent on sealanes for about 97 per cent of its global trade and the safety of sealanes for both India and ASEAN is highly important.⁽⁷⁷⁾

The 21st century has come with new themes and trends where Southeast Asia has become important to the US and Myanmar is one attraction. Myanmar surprised the international community by showing a change in its official behaviour when it released political prisoners, lifted censorship, and the military rulers met with the opposition in a highly publicized meeting with the prominent leader Aung San SuuKyi, signed peace agreements with two rebellious minorities on the borderlands and welcomed back the United Nations special envoy to Myanmar. Therefore, Myanmar's isolation in international community has started to recede gradually. The US and European Union are looking forward to engaging with Myanmar.⁽⁷⁸⁾

America's emerging interests in Myanmar and Asia-Pacific, though generally due to Myanmar's location where it neighbours the Asian giants India and China, and maritime gateway for Chinese interests, are seen in the region with a mixed feeling of relief and concern. India had been critical of the sanctions imposed by the US and European Union as it left no choice for Myanmar but to rely on China. Lately the then secretary of state Hillary Clinton and President Obama's visit to Myanmar and Myanmar's decision of halting the Mysitone Dam project undertaken by China has irked China. President Obama's message was that the US was "here to stay" as a Pacific power and there is a new trade alliance in the queue which probably excludes China. All this has created annoyance in Beijing. There is an opinion in the West that the US needs to be careful and not antagonize China which has great leverage over Myanmar. The United States evolving interests in Myanmar and the region as a whole not only gives it access to the Indian Ocean but serves as a counterweight to China. For the US, China's emergence as world's largest economy in the coming years poses the biggest challenge.⁽⁷⁹⁾

China disagrees with the opinion of Washington officials that the US is not interested in countering Chinese influence there. Chinese state-run newspaper the *Global Times* warned that "Beijing would not accept seeing its interests stamped on" though it does not stop Myanmar from improving its relations with the West. In fact, China views US engagement with Myanmar as a sign of benefit where Myanmar would be under no sanctions and Chinese business will flourish in a normalised environment.⁽⁸⁰⁾ As China confronts socio-economic, regional and international challenges, any rift engineered by the US in countering China through India in Myanmar and the region will create instability.

Not only China but the ASEAN countries also, though once concerned over increasing Chinese interests in the region, get worried about India-China competition and India's growing economic and military clout in the region. Now with the US coming into the region as an internationally dominating power, it would be difficult to ignore the prospects of US encouraging India to act get more assertive and more visibly as a regional power against China in the region. This kind of scenario would instil apprehensions of insecurity and instability among the smaller ASEAN countries. Therefore, United States' shifting stance

towards Myanmar and Myanmar's shifting policies towards its giant neighbours creates a sense of insecurity among the regional actors; in particular, China which will most probably make Myanmar a battleground with India to contest their interests in the country.

Conclusion

Probably the first thing that comes to mind on mentioning Asia is China and India, though the Southeast Asian region comprises of ten most economically thriving countries which are overshadowed by these two giant neighbours. These countries occupy the best strategic location on the map with abundance of natural resources. Economically, these resources integrate to contribute to the booming of each country and to the region as a whole, making it an economic hub. Politically, the region provides stability in this part of the world which is rapidly reshaping the global balance of power. Myanmar is part of this reshaping region which is getting attention of not just these two regional giants but the international community as well.

The arguments discussed in the paper point out that it was China's growing presence in Myanmar that mainly alerted India and left it nervous. This gave birth to India's 'Look East' Policy in the 1990's which is still an important part of its foreign policy in dealing with Myanmar and the region beyond. In pursuing this policy India faces tough competition from China, actively present in Myanmar and the Ocean. Although Chinese presence in Myanmar did not interfere with its having good relations with India and their bilateral trade is expected to reach \$3 billion by 2015, the figure still remains half that of present Myanmar-China volume.

China has always looked at Myanmar through strategic lens while India's Myanmar policy prior to the 'Look East' shift focused on issues of democracy and human rights, which led to a long decade of frosty relations. For China Myanmar is an answer to the development requirements of its western provinces which are lagging behind economically compared to the developed eastern provinces that have the advantage of being on the sea routes. China's foreign policies are based on pragmatic approach: state-to-state relations irrespective of a country's internal government system. So it has ties with both democracies and dictatorships. Myanmar is strategically important to China which regards its stability as a factor of utmost importance.

For India to address neglected areas of its bilateral relations with Myanmar, the Indian government needs to engage with insurgents for political dialogue to achieve a peaceful solution to the decades old issues in the region and the same goes for the Myanmar government. The problem with India's 'look east' policy is that to date there has been almost no role for the Northeastern states which is in sharp contrast to China's Yunnan province which is playing an active role in national pursuit of cultivating closer relations with neighbours. The people of India's Northeastern region should also be integrated into the mainstream politics. Besides a dialogue, there is a dire need to have development projects where the local people are also involved. Both India and Myanmar can utilize the potential of shared ethnicity for pursuing peace in both

countries' troubled border region. India can take off from the encouraging push given it by Myanmar involving it in nurturing the newborn democracy.

Besides the bilateral balancing of relationships, a triangular balance among India-Myanmar-China is equally imperative. China with prospects of emerging as the world's top economic power within the next decade cannot be confronted aggressively. Therefore, along with competition India needs to keep a balance in its ties with Myanmar and China where the traditional ally of Myanmar does not get offended to the extent of being sidelined. If this kind of situation emerges then the security of both India and Myanmar could get vulnerable, not to mention the tension and unease it would bring to the other smaller Southeast Asian countries. Moreover, if Myanmar also carefully balances its relations with both of its giant neighbours in the changing regional and global situation, then the regional security and development outlook may not be as uncertain as some observers believe.

The India-Myanmar-China triangle can be utilized strategically well by balancing each side's interests and ambitions. Moreover, the triangle can also be converted into platforms for global geo-political transformation where they can together shape an 'Asian Era' of the 21st century. Despite their growing mutual competition, India and China have become closer to each other to a certain extent or rather dependent on each other for their national interests in this multi-aligned global system. China and India's interests are bound to converge and their mutual cooperation in particular in Myanmar is in the region's interest as well. The rational decision both countries took in the past in putting bilateral disputes on the back burner and pursuing economic relations first have given them a standing role to play in future regional transformation.

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