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India – Myanmar Strategic Friendship: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Along with historical, religious, and ethnic legacies, India and Myanmar are of immense importance to each other to ensure development and security in their respective nations. Both countries are strategically important and economically valuable for each other. India shapes this relationship through a twin neighbourhood strategy called 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East Policy' (AEP). Since Mr Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister (2014) in New Delhi, the bilateral relationship between both countries has been seriously boosted, even under the current junta administration. While Myanmar is known as the gateway to Southeast Asia for India, North-East India is its closest neighbourhood. Experts argue that the South Asian Region reaches Myanmar, and Southeast Asia ends in the northeastern parts of India. However, several challenges in bilateral relations question this argument. The paper critically evaluates the India-Myanmar bilateral relations in the present scenario.

Keywords: Act East Policy; Bangladesh; Myanmar; Neighbourhood First; North-East India; Rohingya; Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar-India relations are strategically important and economically valuable for each other. Both countries share a long land and maritime border. Along with historical, religious, and ethnic legacies, both countries are of immense importance to each other to ensure development and security in their respective nations. India shapes this relationship through a twin neighbourhood strategy called 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East Policy'.¹ Since Mr Narendra Modi came to power in New Delhi (2014), the bilateral relationship has been seriously boosted. He called his Southeast Asia policy an Act East Policy, making it more action oriented.

Myanmar has severe implications for India's neighbourhood strategy. The region serves as a corridor for progress and prosperity; therefore, India is improving land, sea, and

air connectivity with it. The nation is also crucial for India's security, especially in its northeastern regions (NER). Due to its geo-economic and geo-political importance, NER has become the core of the AEP.² India is forging and furthering the relationship through several bilateral, regional, and multilateral understandings. This is part of India's larger South and Southeast Asia policies, popularly known as AEP. On 14 May 2023, India and Myanmar celebrated the 75th Anniversary Diamond Jubilee of their Diplomatic Relations at the National Theatre in Yangon.³ However, in the present situation in Myanmar, particularly after the post-military coup, bilateral relations are at the test of time. Both countries continuously try to engage with each other beyond their ideological compulsions. The paper also attempts to analyse whether both countries' security and economic situation are complementary. The paper also addresses India's diplomatic efforts to bring democracy to Myanmar while identifying the



modalities to engage the military junta, particularly in the shadow of China's increasing influence in the region.

HISTORY, CULTURE AND RELIGIOUS LINKAGES

The India-Myanmar relations are based on deep-rooted cultural and religious bonds between the people of the two countries. They have warmly lived with shared history, culture, and spiritual values. Strong foundations for this relationship have been laid beside the common heritage of Hinduism and Buddhism, including its cardinal principles like the philosophy of love and compassion, tolerance, social services, non-violence, and peace. These socio-economic, commercial, political, and cultural relations have existed since ancient and medieval times. People of both nations also bind strongly with shared ideas and social values. The historical kingdoms and the Buddhist-Hindu philosophy have helped the links to be consolidated through centuries.⁴

Both countries' way of life and social values are the same, with a strong basis of Vedic-Hindu and Buddhist culture and philosophical traditions. The national epic, the Yama Zatdaw, profoundly connects with the Ramayana and its love, faith, devotion, respect, and compassion traditions. Some other direct connections exist, such as the Sanskrit and Pāli languages and other Indian scripts. Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism, Brahmanism and Hinduism,⁵ along with the sacred texts like Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata epics, are significant sources of connections.

History says that in 228 BC, the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka sent two religious mercenaries, Sona and Uutra, to Suwarnabhoomi [Burma] to propagate Buddhism.⁶ It is also said that the name Barma is derived from the Vedic-Hindu word Brahmin [priestly class]. The Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya, Bihar, is considered the most sacred place for Burmese Buddhists. They believe India is Lord Buddha's country and a pilgrimage place. The close geographical proximity also facilitates easy people-to-people contact between the two countries.

Myanmar/Burma has been influenced by classical Hindu civilisation since ancient times. No doubt, the early relations between them developed through trade, culture, language, etc. Initially, people from the coasts of Bengal, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh sailed to the coasts of Burma for trade. People in ancient India viewed Myanmar as the 'Land of Gold'.⁷ It is a common belief among Burmese that Lord Buddha, born in India, visited their land, Ashok built the sacred pagodas, and Buddhism originated in India. In addition, colonial history also strengthened cultural links, as Myanmar was a province of British India. People of both nations struggled for their freedom from the same colonial master.⁸

Diaspora diplomacy has emerged as a powerful lobby and "soft power" tool in International Relations and foreign policy strategy.⁹ This has become a powerful driving force, an economic development agent between and among

countries in the contemporary world. Myanmar hosts more than 2.0 million (4%-5%) people of Indian origin who live and work in various cities. Near Yangon is the city of Zeyawaddy, well-known as the "Little India" in the very heart of Myanmar.¹⁰ In 2014, New Delhi started a diaspora initiative called the "Know India Programme", which aims to help India-origin youths to know their historical and cultural connections in India.¹¹ This unique bilateral bond has been portrayed through 6Bs, argues Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2017) – Buddhism, Business, Bollywood, Bharatanatyam, Burma teak and Bharosa (trust).¹²

To bolster their relations, both nations have taken up some key initiatives to protect cultural heritage, including restoring ancient temples and pagodas and celebrating national days and festivals. National and international days such as International Yoga Day, the Birth Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, Constitution Day, ICCR Foundation Day, etc., are celebrated in Myanmar.¹³

GROWING CHINESE INFLUENCE IN MYANMAR

A trend of competing interests to share the profit of geo-economic fruits among the USA, China, Russia and India, centring Myanmar, is on the rise. On the other hand, rising Chinese influence in Myanmar has also been a concern for India.¹⁴ Chinese interference in the security situation in the northeast has been growing faster since 1962. In addition, Chinese investment in Myanmar has reached US\$2.5 billion. China is now funding nearly dozens of infrastructure projects, including high-speed rail links and dams. Its largest strategic asset is the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, worth billions of dollars. China is also investing in building Kyaukphyu Port to get access to the Indian Ocean.¹⁵

FACING COMMON PROBLEMS

Conflicts in recent times have become increasingly complex. The nature of conflict has completely changed in its intensity and frequency. Nowadays, subversive groups rely more on indirect tactics like insurgency, terrorism, and guerilla-type attacks. India's NER, particularly the India-Myanmar border region, is highly infected by such violence.¹⁶ In addition, China has definitely "exploited" the already deteriorated situation in NER and supplies arms to the anti-India insurgent groups. The region is infested with cross-border crime syndicates, including smuggling and trafficking of goods, animals, small arms and Indian counterfeit currency, drug trafficking, insurgency, violence and abduction, etc. The region is also very close to the 'Golden Triangle', the main transit route for large-scale drug trafficking in the world. There is also proven evidence of Northeast insurgent groups having links with the Arakan/Rakhine terror groups supported by China. The Rohingyas in the Rakhine State of Myanmar have formed an insurgent group popularly known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). This was



earlier known as Harakah al-Yaqin (2013) and supported by Pakistan's Inter-service Intelligence (ISI).¹⁷

BILATERAL COOPERATION

The visits of heads of state, ministries and officials from both sides have been going on since 1951. According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), till November 2022, India's development assistance portfolio in Myanmar is over US \$1.75 billion.¹⁸ There are more than 10 critical Indian projects active in Myanmar, including the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, the Trilateral Highway Project, the Advanced Centre for Agricultural Research and Education and the Rakhine State Development Programme.¹⁹ India has sanctioned a US \$500 million Line of Credit to Myanmar to conduct several of its projects. In September 2022, both countries signed a Project Agreement to construct a Modern Integrated Checkpost at Tamu in Myanmar. India is also working on a 2000MW hydroelectricity project in the Tamanthi River in Chindwin.²⁰

Cooperations in other sectors, such as defence, security, trade-commerce, science-technology, agriculture, cultural exchange programmes, disaster relief, and articulation through diaspora diplomacy etc., are in full swing. India-Myanmar defence cooperation has been another means of bilateral relations between them. In the last decade, their bilateral trade has grown steadily and reached US\$ 1.03 billion in 2021-22. India is Myanmar's fifth-largest trading partner.²¹ Through an investment of US\$ 771.488 million, India stands at 11th position (November 2019), whereas Myanmar's investment is US\$ 8.97 Million.²² In addition, India and Myanmar are potential energy sector partners and jointly work towards harnessing oil and gas.

India has always shown sincerity in providing relief materials and humanitarian aid to neighbouring countries in natural calamities/disasters. Under 'Operation Karuna', India sent 40 tons of humanitarian assistance and relief materials to Myanmar, which was affected by a severe tropical cyclone in May 2023.²³ In February 2021, India sent humanitarian medical aid and vaccines to Myanmar to fight the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.²⁴ Besides taking care of historical and spiritual monuments, critical national days and festivals are celebrated in each other's national capitals. India has also offered Scholarships and other training programs to Myanmar students/workers.

GEOSTRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

India and Myanmar share a 1,643 km land border and a maritime boundary of 725 km in the Bay of Bengal (Andaman Sea), abutting four states of the Northeast, such as Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram.²⁵ Truly, Myanmar is situated at the intersection of India's twin neighbourhood strategies, 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East Policy'. India's Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asian

diplomacy cannot be furthered without taking Myanmar on board. Besides these high-quality equations, they focus more on the greater economic weight and strategic orientation. For strategic reasons, Myanmar has become vital for India's Southeast Asian adventure and for promoting more significant economic, strategic, and cultural links in the broader Asia-Pacific region.

DEVELOPMENT AND INVESTMENT PERSPECTIVES

Both countries have enormous potential for trade, commerce and investment. While India is one of the fastest-growing world economies and has huge opportunities for global investors, Myanmar has equally shown the world its vast unexplored natural resources and investment opportunities. Due to their proximity, both countries are best for trade, commerce, and investment between them. Today, both countries are major regional strategic partners, giving each other more investment opportunities.

Besides trade and commerce, there are several other sectors where both countries can invest, i.e., defence, science-technology, energy, cross-border infrastructure, agriculture, urban development, education, human development, etc. Both countries are working on setting up border hats on both sides of the border on the lines of India-Bangladesh border area development models. Cooperations in other sectors, such as defence, security, trade-commerce, science-technology, agriculture, cultural exchange programmes, disaster relief, and articulation through diaspora diplomacy, etc., are in full swing. Defence cooperation between the two countries has been a strong pillar of bilateral relations.

Bilateral trade between the two countries has grown steadily in the last decade, reaching US\$ 1.03 billion in 2021-22 and \$1.76 billion in 2022-23.²⁶ Both countries have become major trading partners in the neighbourhood. In addition, India and Myanmar are potential partners in the energy sector and jointly work towards harnessing oil and gas in the Bay of Bengal. While Myanmar invited India to invest in harnessing oil and gas in its sea basins, India finds it beneficial for both countries.

REGIONAL STRATEGY PERSPECTIVES

These close ethnic, religious, and cultural linkages are reflected in bilateral relations and have become a motivational force behind fostering relationships. India announced its 'Act East Policy' in November 2014, and the new 'Look East Policy' version was floated in 1992.²⁷ The main objective of AEP is, besides promoting economic cooperation and cultural ties, to develop strategic relationships with countries in the broader Asia-Pacific region through forging understandings like bilateral, regional and multilateral level engagements. At the 2014 ASEAN summit in Naypyidaw, Myanmar, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled



his new Act East Policy and advocated for boosting regional ties through expanding economic development, industrialisation and trade.²⁸ He argued that ASEAN has become a global economic powerhouse in the 21st century, and India views itself as a key trading and investment partner in this region. Myanmar and India also work together in BIMSTEC, another regional South and Southeast Asian subgroup. India considers Myanmar a key gateway to the ASEAN region and an important country for BIMSTEC and South Asia. New Delhi's main objective is strengthening and promoting cultural ties, economic cooperation, and strategic relationships with the broader Indo-Pacific region.²⁹

ROHINGYA CRISIS

The Rohingya refugee crisis of 2017 has got the attention of the world community due to the violence and atrocity attached to it. It started with the military crackdown by Myanmar military force on Rohingya Muslims in the Rakhine state.³⁰ The result was that nearly 10,00,000 Rohingyas were displaced and migrated to nearby countries to escape the persecution. Most of the refugees have entered Bangladesh and India. While more than 7,00,000 entered Bangladesh,¹⁷ around 50,000 Rohingyas entered India through the sea routes.³¹ The crisis has become one of the major issues among the three countries and has several implications, such as security, economic, societal, and environmental. The world community realises that the Rohingya community needs financial help and political sympathy. When India and Bangladesh believe that the displaced community needs to go back to their homeland, Myanmar has not been cooperative in this matter so far.^{32,33} However, all three countries have been in touch about the issue.³⁴ India has been very proactive in providing financial assistance to Myanmar and Bangladesh for the survival and development of the Rohingyas in their respective countries.^{35,36}

POST-MILITARY COUP

The recent military coup in Myanmar has seriously impacted India-Myanmar bilateral relations. Both countries are still struggling to find ways to engage with each other. On 1 February 2021, Myanmar again went through a political crisis of the military coup staged by Army General Min Aung Hlaing overt roughing the democratically elected government formed by the Aung San Suu Kyi party.³⁷ The democratic institutions have been halted, and the political representatives have been put in jail. Several reports claim more than 6000 Myanmar citizens have lost their lives for direct military actions, and huge numbers have been put in prison for resisting the junta government.³⁸ India, which has always believed in and promoted democracy and democratic institutions in its neighbourhood, has found itself in a dilemma whether to engage with the junta or put pressure

to bring back Myanmar on the path of democracy. Looking at the strategic importance of Myanmar and the growing closeness of China to the junta leaders, India has decided to have a positive engagement with the military administration, though without compromising its diplomatic effort of reinstating democratic government at Naypyidaw. Myanmar's military leadership and establishment have also responded positively, while New Delhi has been facing massive criticism for its present stance.

BORDER FRICTIONS

The civil war situation in Myanmar in the post-military coup has already ramparted the Buddhist nation.³⁹ While India has been cordial in bilateral relations with Myanmar, the recent border clash/conflict between Myanmar border forces and Indian BSF has created a condition of hostility on the border. In the last few months, while the Indian state of Manipur was facing a disruption situation, nearly 600 Myanmar soldiers deliberately and continuously crossed into the Indian Territory.⁴⁰ Subversive groups are also looking for soft targets in the border area in the northeastern region. According to the Mizoram Home Department, nearly 5000 Myanmar nationals from its Chin state and Sagaing region have fled to Mizoram (India), which has joined with more than 30,000 other refugees.⁴¹ However, India has been balancing delicately allowing refugees inside its territory without pressuring the junta administration to take action. But now India has come under tremendous pressure from the political spectrum at the domestic level to take a stand on the issue.^{42,43} The entire northeast region is in danger of several kinds if no stringent policy is adopted. Meanwhile, India has decided to fence the India-Myanmar border in the line of the India-Bangladesh border, said Union Home Minister Amit Shaha on 20 January 2024.⁴⁴

NEW TERROR GROUPS IN BORDER REGION

Amid the spreading of civil war and violence near the Indo-Myanmar border, several insurgent and terror groups have become overactive and are trying to enter Indian territory. Intelligence reports show that several new insurgent groups have emerged in the border region. Lungi-clad, Kuki-Chin, and some other small groups are the most powerful. Another reality is the spreading of terror networks in the region emerging from this crisis.⁴⁵ The situation in Rakhine has been exploited by the terrorist-jihadist groups based in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.⁴⁶ The Aqa-Mul-Mujahideen, linked with Pakistan-based Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami Arakan and its intelligence agency ISI, are mainly responsible for instigating the Rohingya Muslims against Buddhists in Myanmar⁴⁷ through Rohingya Solidarity Organization, The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, and Arakan Army, etc. For geostrategic, geoeconomic, and geopolitical reasons, China has been helping/supplying these



militant groups with high-quality, sophisticated weapons and missiles.⁴⁸ Intel reports have also verified that some new jihadist/terror/insurgent groups have come up along the Myanmar borders with India and Bangladesh, viz., Lungi-clad, Kuki-Chin, and the Kachin Independence Army.⁴⁹ India has been trying hard to ensure that the radicalisation of the Arakan corridor does not emerge as the new terror-jihadi flashpoint that can directly impact its maritime security in the Bay of Bengal and the venerable northeastern region.⁵⁰

ROHINGYAS INVOLVEMENT IN ANTI-INDIA PROTESTS

Intel has already reported that many Rohingyas were found involved in anti-national activities in India, and they have links with terror and other extremist groups such as ISI and Islamic States.⁵¹ Similar information was submitted to the SC in 2017 by the Government of India. There are also allegations that the anti-Hindu violence in the post-2021 state elections in West Bengal and communal riots in the National Capital, Delhi, in the last few years found Rohingyas and Bangladeshis were involved.⁵² Allegedly, in a fraction of time, the Rohingya problem, from a humanitarian crisis, has become a grave security issue for India.

CONCLUSION: MUTUAL TRUST AND RESPECT IN THE FRIENDSHIP

The world is changing faster, and the regions are opening up to each other with new expectations.⁵³ As hassle-free economic cooperation has become the reality of the time, so have the emerging new security problems. Globalisation and the easy exchange of information technology have brought new economic opportunities for states and new security threats.⁵⁴ States are redesigning their economic policies and security strategies accordingly in a way that can bring more profit and fewer challenges.⁵⁵ One of India's core principles in foreign policy is non-interference in neighbours' domestic affairs. India has always tried to stick to this principle. For example, India's trade ties with China in 1954, popularly known as Panchsheel.^{56,57} New Delhi has also learned to forge bilateral relations with regimes beyond ideological differences, like in Myanmar and Afghanistan.⁵⁸ Though promoting democracy has been one of India's core agendas in its foreign policy, it has successfully established good relationships with different regimes around the world.⁵⁹

From various perspectives, the sustainability of this bilateral relationship between India and Myanmar is equally vital for both countries. India's pro-developmental policies, non-reciprocity, asymmetry, and people-oriented attitude help the relationship become solid.^{60,61} Both countries should work together beyond ideological differences, security compulsions, and political scenarios.⁶² Besides state visits, more focus should be given to economic coopera-

tion, cross-border infrastructure building, the exchange of information, people-to-people contact, border trade, etc.⁶³ Both countries must respect each other's interests, and compulsions facilitate flexibility and create a conducive environment for the relations to grow. The proposed cross-border bus service between both countries would also be another milestone in linking the two nations and is expected to win millions of hearts.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, the Narendra Modi government's proactive Act East Policy has taken the relationship to an all-time high.⁶⁵ India must keep its best diplomatic efforts to encourage the junta government to reinstate democracy and democratic institutions in Myanmar. New Delhi must keep its faith in the democratic leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi as India's best political-diplomatic investment in Myanmar.^{66,67} Even in the Rohingya refugee issue, India's stand is clear that it wants a permanent political solution and believes the current situation can be solved through the joint effort of India-Bangladesh-Myanmar.

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