



China-Myanmar relation trends and its implications for India

Divya Dwivedi

Senior Research Fellow, Department of Defence & Strategic Studies, University of Allahabad, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

This paper examines the current scenario and roads ahead to the Sino-Myanmar relationships and its implications on Sino-India relationships. It gives a close look to the security challenges India can face as the implication of China-Myanmar relation today. Myanmar and China share a 2153 kilometer border but had serious ideological differences in the initial decades after independence. Myanmar had adopted democracy from the British and the presence of Communist party activities were always under suspicion and thus Myanmar never tilted toward that ideology. It was only after the imposition of sanctions in 1990 by the world that both the nations brew closer ties. The reasons for this proximity has been described by many analysts as a marriage of convenience. Myanmar was not only in need of military hardware but also a close ally which could protect its interests and China was looking at its strategic priorities and economic engagement. However in 2007 when China thwarted the UN resolution in UNSC against Myanmar, the world first time openly witnessed the warm embrace. Soon after this China bagged the coveted 1400 kilometer oil and Gas pipeline from Bay of Bengal to underdeveloped Yunnan province. This was a real watershed in their bilateral relations.

Keywords: Sino-India relations, China-Myanmar relations, India-Myanmar, India's national security, India and neighboring countries, security threats

1. Introduction

Union of Myanmar or Myanmar, known to be the largest country by geographical area in the mainland South-east Asia. It is also known by the name of Burma or the Union of Burma by bodies and states which do not recognize the ruling military junta, it shares borders with the People's Republic of China on the North, Laos on the East, Thailand on the Southeast, Bangladesh on the West, India on the Northwest, the Andaman Sea to the South, and the Bay of Bengal to the Southwest. A perimeter of 1,930 km forms an uninterrupted coastline which is one-third of Myanmar's perimeter. The country's culture is based on a unique form of Buddhism intertwined with local customs and culture which is heavily influenced by its neighbors.

Ever Since it gained its independence from Britain in Jan 1948, Myanmar has existed in a state of war from within. Enormous price has been paid by the ethnic minorities in six decades of conflict. Civil war being the prominent feature of Myanmar marked by prolonged control by the country's armed forces for half a century of its 6 decades of existence. The military regime dominates every aspect of society including politics and economy of Myanmar with an iron hand. China helped a massive expansion of the armed forces-the *Tatmadaw*- between 1989 and 1995, saved the regime from collapsing by pro-democracy protests.

In the last 3 decades world has witnessed outstanding economical growth of China as a nation and today it is the second largest economy in the world after the United States. This exponential economic growth has resulted in its growing military and its growth strategically in the region. It has concluded border disputes with almost all of its neighbours

except India and has been working on its plan to make its reach southward into the Indian ocean. With over two decades of serious sanctions by the world has bridled Myanmar already weak economy into abject state. Almost half of the population is below poverty line as per the world standards so when China and Myanmar started collaborating after 1990 there was a very obvious notion amongst the analysts that Myanmar is going to become a client state of China.

Myanmar and China had serious ideological differences in the initial decades after the independence. Since Myanmar had adopted their democracy from the British the presence of Communist party activities were always under suspicion and thus Myanmar never tilted toward that ideology but after the imposition of sanctions in 1990 both the nations brew closer ties. It has been described by many analysts as a marriage of convenience. Myanmar was in need of military hardware and also a close ally to protect its interests and China was looking at its strategic priorities and economic engagement. In 2007 China bagged the coveted 1400 kilometer oil and Gas pipeline from Bay of Bengal to underdeveloped Yunnan province. This was a real watershed in their bilateral relations

The new government of Thein Sein after 2011 elections commenced political and economic reforms which opened the market to foreign investment mainly from the west. By this time China's investment was already over \$14.4 bn. Observers had also commented that Myanmar's proximity to China was adversely affecting its international standing. Myanmar's failure to portray itself from a pro-China to pro-west would have isolated it internationally and increased its dependence on China. The unprecedented support which Myanmar's nascent democratic government received from India, Japan,

Europe and US not only bewildered China but Myanmar itself.

The growing closeness of the two was watched very closely by Myanmar's neighbours specially India. growing military ties and establishment of electronic surveillance in Indian Ocean very close to the Indian maritime boundary is of paramount interest to India. However now its the concern of USA, Japan and EU too, willingness to re-establish ties with the government of Myanmar and starting it with opening up the sanctions is an evidence.

China got worried of this development which is evident from shrinking of its investment between 2011-13. From a whopping \$13.3 billion till 2011 it grew by a very low margin to reach \$14.14 bn in 2013. There has been no announcements of any major investment reported in Myanmar since the suspension of Myitson dam in 2011. Large state-owned energy and mining companies have been most active in Myanmar in the past. Although some of the investors still wish to invest in the country to preempt western competition, they are advised to hold off new projects until further notice. The sharp reduction of investment is perceived as a reaction to "not towing the Chinese line" by Naypyidaw, as Beijing warns its companies of the rising political risk against Chinese investment in Myanmar.

2. Chinese strategic interests

China's Strategic interests in Myanmar are multifold; maintaining access to the Indian Ocean to counter Indian militarization, countering encirclement of China, stabilizing the Chinese border to Myanmar and preventing the spillover of Myanmar's ethnic conflicts into China, are some of its multifold Strategic interests in Myanmar. It is an open secret that China looks Myanmar as its future 'landbridge' to the Indian Ocean. Naypyidaw is concerned over China's growing influence in Myanmar particularly in military areas. Based on China's fear of containment and the increasing costs of trade there are several limitations that China encounters.

Chinese assistance for Myanmar was in its interest to survive through the large scale international boycott and to reduce the tensions with the minority ethnic groups in the northern part of the country. Government of Myanmar has very little options with China and is in a dependent relationship. Kokang Incident in 2009 is an example of it, when the Myanmar Army cracked down on weapons production in the border area, which resulted in about 30000 people fleeing into neighbouring China. This did not go well with the Chinese government. These kind of incidents risks damaging bilateral relations and creating further tension in the border regions.

There is a "string of pearls" of port facilities that China has constructed or collaborated in construction stretching from Sihanoukville (Cambodia), Laem Chabang (Thailand), Kyaukphyu (Myanmar), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Hambantota (Sri Lanka) to Gwadar (Pakistan). If the regimes that are friendly towards provides a developed network of port facilities for China will improve its security situation both economically and militarily. Due to its geographical location, China has greater use of the port facilities in Myanmar, as goods could be transported easily to China by the land route, if Myanmar permits. China has connections to a number of ports in Myanmar, such as Hainggyi, Coco, Sittwe, Zadetkyi,

Myeik and Kyaukphyu. To assume that these ports are a sign of Chinese military expansion and potential aggression against India or other states in the region, is problematic. There is no doubt that China has an interest in developing port facilities – both for military and civilian purposes – but there is less evidence that this strategy has been successful. International Crisis Group has pointed out that most of the accusations made primarily by India regarding large Chinese signal intelligence stations, have been false.

China desires of expanding its strategic presence into the Indian Ocean and protect its sea lines of communication threatened by the "Malacca dilemma". Chinese analysts claim that, an overreliance on the strait poses two threats: piracy and maritime terrorism in the region and the attempts of powerful states, notably the U.S., to dominate the Malacca strait. In a November 2003 speech to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, President Hu Jintao called for the adoption of new strategies to mitigate the perceived vulnerability as he believed "certain major powers" were bent on controlling the strait.

In late 1980s, to fulfil its ambitious plan to enlarge and modernise its armed forces the Myanmar government turned to Beijing. Currently the largest supplier of weapons to Myanmar, the PLA also provides the Burmese army with training in the technical use of weapons and weapon systems. As on August 2008 batch of 200 military trucks, were observed crossing into Myanmar through Ruili on the China-Myanmar border is said to carry armoured personnel carriers, tanks, fighter aircraft, radar systems, ammunition, surface-to-air missiles and short-range air-to-air missile systems and much of the weaponry. Since the mid-1990s the generals have added to their weapons suppliers which was partially a response to dissatisfaction with the quality of Chinese military weaponry, but also to secure themselves from dependence on one supplier. Currently, the government continues to buy low-level equipments primarily to maintain good relations, but also because China offers a better price – at times as good as half the market rate. They reinforce the bilateral relationship, strengthening China's foothold in and possible access to the Indian Ocean while putting it in a better position to protect its sea lines of communication. Second, arms sales to Myanmar – like to Pakistan – complicate India's security environment. According to a Chinese official, "We do not just give them whatever they want", as the Chinese take into consideration the regional balance of power and concerns of Myanmar's and other neighbours, in particular Bangladesh and Thailand, when determining what to sell.

3. India's strategic interests

The close historical ties between India and Myanmar was the reason that relations remained cordial for almost four decades. But a dip in their relations was witnessed as India supported the pro-democracy movement forces in Myanmar after 1988 forced military takeover of the election process. India launched its 'Look East Policy' somewhere in late 1990s and demonstrated New Delhi's desire to pursue its strategic and economic goals in Myanmar. However, it has become difficult to do so without compromising its commitment to human rights and democratic principles.

By ensuring smooth trade and connectivity between India and

Myanmar, the objective of much needed development in India's North Eastern states could be achieved, Myanmar was seen as a pivot of India's Look East Policy for the simple reason that it is the only South East Asian nation with which India shares a land border. Myanmar was viewed as a land-bridge to the rest of South East Asia. A second important factor in India-Myanmar relations was the need to control the activities of insurgent groups in their bordering states. Thirdly, India and Myanmar also need to work together to prevent the spread of epidemics across borders especially considering the threat of HIV/AIDS and recent outbreaks like swine flu and bird flu. Finally, the need to ensure the development of India's North Eastern states was important for India. Given all this, India and Myanmar realized the need to take steps keeping security in mind.

4. Agreements signed during the PM's visit in 2012

12 MoUs (Memorandums of Understanding) have been signed between India and Myanmar on matters of mutual concern, *development and connectivity* being the key watchwords. The cooperation in fields such as agriculture, trade, education and information technology would add to the Myanmar's developmental needs. One of the important agreements reached was regarding cooperation between a Myanmar and an Indian University and cooperation between a Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs think tank (MISIS) and two Indian think tanks, one of which is the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Cooperation among strategic studies think tanks is especially welcomed because while MISIS is connected with the ASEAN network of think tanks, it has no such link on an institution basis with the think tanks of India or of the South Asian region.

Indo-Myanmar border stability depends in large on economic stability that comes through planned development. For instance, Myanmar has many missing links in form of roads and rail and over 70 bridges still awaiting construction before overcoming the connectivity deficit. It has been decided to initiate steps to upgrade road sections in order to make the trilateral Asian Highway (connecting Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand) a reality. Besides initiating improvements in road connectivity, a direct air service between India and Myanmar has also received the green signal. Similarly, hope has been generated for eventual freight transport by rail network extending to other South East Asian countries through Myanmar from India's North East.

Myanmar's energy sector would get a boost with Indian companies investing in that country's gas and oil sectors. It is likely that Indian companies would be considered when more oil blocks are auctioned. In addition, border trade would be improved and the overall trade doubled beyond the current \$1.2 billion. Myanmar also once again reassured India support for tackling safe havens of Indian insurgents in its territory.

5. Impact of political reforms in Myanmar on Myanmar – China - India relations

The key turning point for Myanmar in 2011 was the return of democracy which saw brought many political changes. Myanmar's political reforms have contributed to positive changes internally and externally. The new government of President U Thein Sein carried out various internal

reformation procedures, which included historical meeting with Daw Aung San Su Kyi, granting of amnesty for political prisoners, relaxation of press and internet censorships, and implementation of new labour laws that allowed unions to function. The most significant event in Myanmar's political reform process was the landslide victory of the National League for Democracy in the by-election of 2012. The new government also managed to achieved a ceasefire agreement with the Karen National Union and ended the world's longest running civil conflicts. ASEAN members have accepted Myanmar's bid for ASEAN chair for 2014 can be counted as the result of reforms on external front. The relationship between Myanmar and the United States warmed up a visit made by the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Myanmar in December 2011 to encourage further progress. It is the first visit by a US Secretary of State in more than fifty years. The United States restored relations at ambassadorial level and lifted restrictions on the work of the IMF and the World Bank in Myanmar. The EU allowed most top Myanmar government officials to travel within EU countries and also lifted most of the sanctions imposed against Myanmar. Furthermore, the Australian government similarly lifted travel restrictions and encouraged other cooperative steps. Japan started the resumption of both economic aid and private investment to waive the debts of Myanmar.

Myanmar's over-dependence on China was one of the factors that caused Myanmar to adopt political reforms. In political terms, China did not expect the rapid political reforms in Myanmar although there are close political and economic ties between Myanmar and China. Beijing decreased the level and frequency of senior official state visits. However, The only one high level visit was paid by Wu Bangguo, the Chairman of China's National People's Congress. Wu stressed three points of bilateral relations: "to enhance bilateral strategic mutual trust," "to push forward the agreed major cooperation projects," and "to deepen cultural and people to people exchanges". However, the visit did not produce any major announcements It can be concluded that bilateral relations between Myanmar and China cooled down at the political level.

The Thein Sein new government sought to meet the public will and the Western demand for democratic reform at the cost of partially sacrificing Chinese economic interests. Taking economy in account, the suspension of the Myitsone Dam project by the new government alerted China of Myanmar's policy shift. With repercussions from the Myitsone suspension, the broad resentment against Chinese projects including CNPC oil and gas pipeline project and NORICO copper mine project directly changed Chinese investment behaviors in Myanmar. After 2012, Chinese companies had to face competition from American, European, Japanese and Korean companies in order to enter into Southeast Asian underdeveloped market. Naypyidaw lost its confidence in the Chinese technology after the Wenzhou high-speed train collision in July 2011, Myanmar analysts observed it to be a reason of China losing the Yangon-Naypyidaw high speed railway contract to Japanese companies. The engagement of the United States in Myanmar and their dramatic improvement of ties undermined China's strategic interests in Myanmar as well as China's influence in that region. At the same time,

potential military cooperation between the United States and Myanmar alerted China. In addition to that, China's national security faces serious challenges to both the invitation of Myanmar to observe the U.S-led Cobra Gold joint military exercise and the potential intelligence sharing between the CIA and Myanmar. In the changing context of Myanmar's international relations, Myanmar has not stood on the Chinese side to support China's strength at ASEAN. "According to President Thein Sein's advisor, Myanmar determines its position on the South China Sea in accordance with its own national interest and solidarity of ASEAN as the regional organization, implying that Myanmar has no intention to back up China's position."

India adopted its famous 'Look East Policy' in early nineties after seeing the forays being made by China in Myanmar. The next few years witnessed a number of visits exchanged by the high dignitaries from India and Myanmar. India whilst still supportive of the pro-democracy movement, began to actively engage with the military junta and tried to revive the old ties. Shyam Saran, the former Indian Ambassador to Myanmar in 1997 commented that, "the relations were still frigid". A high-powered delegation including Deputy Prime Minister Lt. Gen. Tin Hla along with a team ministers made a visit to New Delhi brought by Gen Maung Aye, the second-most prominent leader of Myanmar's military junta, in November 2000. The then India's Home Minister, L.K. Advani, tried to break the frigidity and talked about warming up of ties between the two countries. This visit was followed by a six day visit of Gen Than Shwe to New Delhi in 2004 and in 2006 President Abdul Kalam visit to Yangon. A number of bilateral treaties were signed relating from sharing of cultural, social to technology and military cooperation in these ongoing visits by the two countries. Subsequent years witnessed the Government of India active involvement in over a dozen projects in Myanmar, both in infrastructural and non-infrastructural areas. These operations included upgradation and resurfacing of the 160 km. long Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyoroad; construction and upgradation of the Rhi-Tiddim Road in Myanmar; the Mega Rs 1500 Crore Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project, which was going to link the north-eastern states via the Bay of Bengal and Myanmar route⁷. An ADSL project for high speed data link in 32 Myanmar cities has been completed by TCIL, ONGC, GAIL and ESSAR are participants in the energy sector in Myanmar. M/s RITES is involved in development of the rail transportation system and in supply of railway coaches, locos and parts. In September 2008, NHPC signed an agreement for development of the Tamanan Shwezay Hydro-Electric Power project in Chindwin River. A heavy turbo-truck assembly plant set up in Myanmar by TATA Motors with GOI financial assistance was inaugurated on December 31, 2010.

Other projects include revamping of the Ananda Temple in Bagan, upgradation of the Yangon Children's Hospital and Sittwe General Hospital. India has also assisted in the reconstruction of one high school and 6 primary schools in Tarlay township, the area worst affected by the severe earthquake that struck north-eastern Myanmar in March 2011^[8].

A proper roadmap of Indian Govt-Industry plan should include such sectors which not only gives inclusive growth to

Myanmar but also regional growth for our eastern states however what needs to be kept in mind by the Indian Industry and the Government is the wider interest of the north eastern states so that the dividends of growth are seen on both sides of the border areas. The proposals must stress upon the development of road and communication infrastructure to support the projects undertaken through the land route. A proper planning of the projects can have a long term impact of development for both the economies; Myanmar and the North East India. We must think in terms of harnessing the energy reserves in Myanmar and may be creating some energy-processing hubs in the eastern states for subsequent usage in the development of the adjoining areas. Setting up of ancillary industry for supply to specific projects in Myanmar can also be planned and some economic zones can be specified for such purpose. It should be reframed to be more of a 'Look-East through North-East' policy instead of just 'Look-East' Policy. High level visits have been a regular feature of India-Myanmar relations for several years and it increased further after the new government came to power in 2010.

President Thein Sein paid a State visit to India on October 12-15, 2011 and had a meeting with the Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh, which was followed by delegation level talks. President Thein Sein was accompanied by Chief of General Staff Lt Gen HlaHtay Win and 11 Union Ministers and one Union Deputy Minister and senior officials. With the objective of the visit to share India's experience in parliamentary practices and procedures with the visiting Myanmar delegation In December 2011 Speaker of PyithuHluttaw (Lower House) Thura U Shwe Mann led a high level parliamentary delegation to India. Myanmar Foreign Minister U WunnaMaung Lwin paid an official visit to India from January 22-26, 2012. All these visits were finally followed by Prime Minister of India Dr. Manmohan Singh's visit to Myanmar in May 2012⁹. This was the first visit of and Indian PM in 25 years. During the visit, several new initiatives were announced and signed 12 MoUs and agreements including extension of a new line of credit (LOC) worth US\$500 million. In Nov 2012 Aung San SuuKyi visited India and spoke at the prestigious Jawahar Lal Nehru memorial lecture in which she stressed the strong bondages the two nations share.

It seems, China, vary of the growing visits of Indian and western dignitaries sent its, Deputy chairman of the Chinese Central Military Commission (CMC) Gen Fan Changlong to meet President Thein Sein and the Myanmar Army Chief Senior General Min Hling in Oct this year. The present visit by the Indian Army chief Gen Bikram Singh from Oct 29 to Nov 1, 2013 is important because of its timings also because of the bridges it is likely to built. The visit by the Indian Army Chief at this point of time will bolster the growing proximity between the two nations and also commence the build up of much needed military ties between the two armies. During this visit Gen Singh held talks with President Thein Sein, Foreign Minister U WunnaMaung Lwin, Commander-in-chief of the defence services, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, among others. Gen Singh also handed over two wargaming software packages called "Combat decision resolution" and "Infantry company commanders tactical trainer" which have been customized for training for the Myanmar Army⁷. He also

gave five hand-gliders for the Defence Services Academy at PwinOo Lwin. Another gesture was to incorporate Myanmarese armed forces special training packages in the Indian Army's counter-insurgency and jungle warfare school at Vairengte in Mizoram.

As it was also reported by the Indian media that Myanmar army is keen to look for courses in mechanised forces like tanks and infantry combat vehicles, information technology, intelligence and English language, among other areas^[10]. The Myanmar Army chief will be making a visit to India in December 2013 to further cement the bond. The most significant part of the present visit of the Army Chief was the establishment of a Army training team at Myanmar. Here the India has an upper hand because till now Myanmar has not permitted any country to establish any such training establishment, not even China, the closest known ally for the last two decades. It is likely to give India an edge to further steer its economic ties to new horizons along with the military perspective with more strategical outlook.

To be mentioned that Myanmar's militarised democracy is making enormous reforms in its governance and is also showing remarkable improvement in its human rights record. The removal of the press censorship, release of over 1000 political prisoners and lifting of entry ban on many others, permission to its prominent political figure and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to travel abroad and the foreign investment are some positive steps^[11]. There has been no reaction from the mighty military power *Tatmadaw* towards these reforms probably because as of now Myanmar needs proper political, economic and social development so that the country can move in the progressive direction. These steps have been welcomed by the democratic neighbour India and also by the western countries. Presently a full fledged democracy is necessary as seen in the western countries and India, instead of militarised democracy which has been the history of Myanmar.

6. Conclusion

It is necessary to understand the historical and present context, national ambitions, and the current means available to achieve the goals to understand an accurate strategic foresight of Sino-Myanmar relations and its implication for India,. At the same time, to offer a precise forecast, there is a need to hypothesize the possible obstacles to these ambitions. The conclusion that can be made from the paper is that the next 5-10 years, from a Chinese standpoint, will be one of balancing nature at one front it has to secure its economic investment through its bilateral relations with the ethnic groups, China and the Junta, and on the other front its attempt to have a stronger involvement in the political arena. In this quest, India and other western countries are likely to give China a hard time in providing economic assistance, infrastructure building, and a political umbrella to the international community. And the resentment of local Chinese presence in Myanmar; border instability; weak Myanmar governance; and stronger international commitments being its other minor challenges.

Alternatively the history of, the military Junta has always been controversial, it believes that it is a legitimate government elected by the people and the regional and international community should recognize it likewise. Through the Seven

Step roadmap to Democracy and the election in 2015, the Junta wants to show its credibility as the government of Myanmar. The Junta has been successful at making regional actors compete for its natural resources and its strategic importance works in its favor. The Junta is financially supported whenever China, India, and ASEAN countries compete for access to Myanmar, which gets translated into political support. The Junta's unwillingness to turn to the direct foreign involvement in its national affairs. India becomes more conducive to Myanmar's objectives with its policies being less assertive.

In conclusion, in the near future, China's economic thirst and its wish to become a regional and international superpower will check each other and will become a matter of choice, and on the other, Myanmar's Junta will attempt to prove it to its neighbors and the world that its government is legitimate one and does need not to bend in order to steer the country.

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