

CHAPTER IV

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

“India is steadily deepening economic and strategic relations with Myanmar, convinced that this is the best approach to engage with a military regime despised by the West. Despite intense American pressures to change tracks, India is pressing ahead...”¹

Differing from the West, Burmese problem has not affected India’s responses to cut off its diplomatic ties or impose any economic sanctions to Myanmar, but the concern over its national interest has guided the change of India’s foreign policy toward this close neighbor. Myanmar is a country of great influence to India. Its geo-strategic location imparts a strategic significance of powerful implications for China and India. Therefore, the increasing friendliness and closer ties between China and Myanmar since 1988 have alarmed India’s worries. Myanmar has become a critical nexus in the China-India connection, as Mohan Malik has described the situation from an Indian perspective that:

*“It is commonly averred that Indian security concerns over the fifty years since Independence have focused on two visible neighbors; Pakistan and China, in that order of priority. However, using the term strategic in a more rigorous sense, this article argues that India’s primary strategic security concern is China and if so, Myanmar occupies the next slot...”*²

This chapter will involve the general background of the triangle relations between China, Myanmar and how Sino- Myanmar friendly relationship since 1988 has effected India’s reaction. In addition, India’s concerns on the Sino –Myanmar ties

¹ Narayan Swamy, “India strengthening economic ties with Myanmar,” New Delhi, 12 April 2007, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage>.

² David I. Steinberg, “Foreign Affairs: Myanmar as Regional Nexus,” *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (USA: Georgetown University Press, 2001): 226.

over its national interest will be explained. Finally, the change of India's strategic foreign policy toward these two countries in the game of counterbalancing since 1988 onward will help us to understand clearly the issue.

A. Sino –Myanmar and India Relations

China, Myanmar and India are the three neighboring countries sharing long border and long histories since centuries. Geographically, Myanmar's location is situated between the two giants neighboring countries; China and India. On the north and northeast sides, China shares its southwest provinces, Yunnan and Sichuan of the longest border 2,768 kilometer with Myanmar, while on the western side, India shares its northeastern states, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram of the long border 1,643 kilometer. Due to Myanmar's strategic location, India has always been key in Sino –Myanmar relations.

China, India and Myanmar established their solid relations in 1954 by signing the key agreements to premise upon the Five Peaceful Co-Existence. However, in regard with the bilateral ties of Indo-Myanmar, the relations totally froze since 1962³ after General Ne Win, who seized power, nationalized all private enterprise in Myanmar and ordered expulsion of Indian. This created a bad blood in India –Myanmar relations. General Ne Win's idea of isolating Myanmar from the rest of the world further distanced India. While China differently has gained a lot siding the military regime, India has lost all its leverage. In addition, when Myanmar began to be shaken by a bloody repression in 1988 and as soon as the SLORC took power, India only froze its relations with Yangon and violently opposed the new regime by giving a full and opened support to the pro-democracy movements. The official diplomatic positions condemning the junta and demanding a return to democracy and humanist values were imposed by India.

³ Syed Ali Mujtaba, "India-Myanmar Relations Predicament and Prospects," 27 August 2006, <http://www.indoburmanews.net>.

In contrary, although Sino –Myanmar ties have undergone a series of up and down during the Cold war era, the isolation and condemnation experienced by both countries in the wake of the Yangon massacre of 1988 and the violent suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests the following year helped to draw them closer together. As elaborate clearly in the earlier chapters, Myanmar has become since 1988 China's closest ally in South-east Asia, a major recipient of Chinese military hardware and a potential springboard for projecting Chinese military power in the region. Close to the key shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean and South-east Asia, Myanmar could help China to extend its military reach into a region of vital importance to Asian economies.

Importantly, the alliance has alarmed India, which in recent years has shifted its strategy, which in recent years has shifted its strategy away from supporting Myanmar's opposition movement towards cementing ties with the junta. On an Indian perception, growing Chinese sphere in Myanmar and their closer friendship, which have been developed especially after the 1988 tragedy in Myanmar, could leave India in risk for its political security and economic development. As a result, while Myanmar remains shunned by the West, the country's two giant neighbors, India and China, are jockeying for influence in Yangon.

To balance Chinese influence in Myanmar, in year 2000, India's army Chief General Ved Prakash Malik has made two trips to Myanmar and his Burmese counterpart General Maung Aye has visited both India and China. These top-level exchanges have highlighted Myanmar's importance in the strategic competition between China and India. Moreover, India has offered Myanmar favorable trade relations and cooperation against ethnic insurgents along the Indo-Myanmar's frontier. Intelligence analysts⁴ say that China's economic political and military influence in the country has already become so strong that it would be hard for

⁴ International Institute for Security Studies, "China's Ambitions in Myanmar," IISS Strategic Comments, issue 6, July 2006, www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/past-issues/volume-6---2000.

Yangon radically to reorient its foreign policy, but the demise of Myanmar's elder generation of military leaders could present opportunities for India to woo Myanmar away from China.

B. India's Concerns

a. Myanmar's Strategic Significance

Geopolitical Location

Myanmar has an area of 6,076,552 sq km or 2,061,218 sq miles. It shares common borders with India and Bangladesh in the west, China in the north and northeast, Laos and Thailand in the east. Myanmar has a strategic importance in the Indian Ocean region as it opens up to the Bay of Bengal in the west and the Andaman Sea in the south. As the bridge between South, Southeast and East Asia, the country has long been deemed strategically important. Concerning the relations with China and India, many analysts have often discussed Myanmar's geo-strategic significance over Sino –Indian rivalry.⁵ In short, Myanmar's location is important to help fulfill India's strategic interest in stabilizing the ethnic insurgencies conflicts along Indian North-East border, as well as in counterbalancing the expansion of China's influences through Myanmar to reach the Bay of Bengal's exit.

Myanmar Bridge

The willingness of reaching out Southeast Asia, especially ASEAN countries is another reason to explain the readiness of India to establish close ties with Myanmar since the beginning of 1990s. In 1991, the Narasimha Rao Government launched of a new "Look East Policy" aimed at getting close to the booming economies of South East Asia. Myanmar is India's gateway to ASEAN as it is the only country of this grouping which has a land and maritime boundary with India. Moreover, India realized that its eastern neighbor could be a valuable bridge to

⁵ Molik J. Mohan, "Burma's Role in Regional Security: Pawn or Pivot?" Contemporary Asia, Vol 19, No 1, pp. 52-73.

Indochina enabling the opening up of its landlocked Northeastern states. With India becoming a summit level partner of ASEAN and a member of the East Asia Summit, improved relations with Myanmar will be beneficial in many respects. Besides Myanmar and India are members of some sub regional groupings such as the Bangladesh India Myanmar Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMST-EC) and the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC).

While closely watching India's diplomatic thrust into South East Asia, China too sought to enter the institutional dynamics of the region and to benefit from those cooperations. Thus, the Chinese southwest province of Yunnan, launched a Kunming Initiatives as a regional forum, gathering neighboring countries; China, Bangladesh, India and Myanmar. The objective is to open up China to the South through Myanmar to Indian Ocean. China has raised its economic profile in South East Asia, particularly in Myanmar despite the sanctions imposed by the west. India should not be left behind especially in view of the large oil and gas resources available in Myanmar.

b. The China Threat

The most sensitive concern of India toward Sino –Myanmar relations is the so-called China Threat. China has for a long time given a wide open support to various Indian insurgents groups, notably those which claimed to follow the Maoist ideology in the 1960s and 1970s. After the Sino-Indian war of 1962, India feared the Chinese militarization of Tibet. Myanmar has not be seen as credible ally China could use against India's interest in the Northeast. Ne Win's regime had very cold and less cordial relations with Beijing and as Myanmar was self isolated, cutting links with the outside world, India did not perceived any Chinese threat through Myanmar before the early 1990s.

The uprising of 1988 in Myanmar and the advent of a new junta in Rangoon changed the geopolitical situation of the country. Once, again isolated, Myanmar rapidly gained the favor of its northern neighbor, China, which took

advantage of the vacuum left in there and established a close partnership since then. The Sino –Myanmar cooperation kept on growing through trade agreement and huge arm deals. It took only a few years for China to get a strong foothold in Myanmar. Myanmar would help China fulfilling its two main objectives to open up the Yunnan and Sichuan provinces towards the Burmese ports on the Indian Ocean as well as to ensure a secure and permanent access to the Bay of Bengal, especially in case of a blockade in the South China sea or off the Malacca Straits. The inclusion of Myanmar into China's grand strategy was then obvious.

China has now deep strategic links with Myanmar. This Chinese influence on the Burmese junta is seen as a potential threat by India, especially as far as the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean is concerned. China is reportedly suspected of having significantly upgraded several ports and naval bases of Myanmar. The construction of several electronic surveillance facilities and listening post along the Burmese coasts on the Bay of Bengal and in the Andaman Sea: Man-aung, Hainggyi, Zadetkyi islands and the strategically important Coco Islands just north of India's Andaman Islands are seen as obviously directed against India, even though Myanmar and China strongly denied it.

C. India's Counter-Strategy

To counterbalance Sino –Myanmar very close relationship that has been developed steadily since 1988, India clearly adopted a sympathetic stance towards the pro democracy uprising and strongly denounced the bloody repression. To speak, the first stance India opted for vis-à-vis Myanmar was a definitely idealist one, a policy of opposition and denunciation of the military regime. However, in the early 1990s, as the regional order began to change, Myanmar's geopolitical position seemed to have been rediscovered and Sino –Myanmar good neighborly friendship has been strengthening, India began to re-evaluate this strategy, concerned that it had only served to push Yangon closer to Beijing. To fulfill its new ambitions to reach

Southeast Asia countries and to move away Myanmar from China's embrace, India has opened a new diplomatic era with the launch of Look East Policy.

The official visit paid by J.N. Dixit, the Indian Foreign Secretary, in March 1993 marked a turning point in the Indo –Burmese relations as India decided from then on to cautiously engage the regime and dropped its isolating policy. The Indian government officially agreed not to interfere in the internal affairs of Myanmar, and vice versa, and thus, India officially considered now the Burmese democratic movements and the Aung San Suu Kyi issue as a Myanmar's internal affair. From New Delhi's viewpoint, this policy shift appears to be successful; illegal logging has declined, terrorist groups are less active, border management is better and the military regime has improved its contacts with the democratic Indian government through more frequent and mutual high-level visits. The success of India's new strategy appears to have been reflected in the outcome of Maung Aye's trip to China in June. The trip was partly aimed at finalising plans for a trade route between China and Myanmar. Intelligence sources in Myanmar say that the idea was to use a fleet of barges to transport goods from Bhamo on the Irrawaddy river, close to the Chinese border, to Minhla, some 1,000 kilometres down-river. In the ongoing high level exchanges, the visit of Indian President APJ Abdul Kalam to Myanmar in April 2006 was a first ever visit by an Indian President to Myanmar since dependence.⁶

In order to achieve its strategic objective and to minimize China's growing presence and influence in Rangoon, India has tried another effort by increasing multilateral ties with Myanmar exposing it to regional and international groups, such as the Bay of Bengal Community (BIMSTEC-Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Economic Community), and the Ganges-Mekong Forum. Critically, the BIMST-EC would connect Indian subcontinent with Indochina, while the MGC was seen as a counterbalance project to China's commitment in the region.

⁶ Mujtaba, "India-Myanmar Relations Predicament and Prospects."