

# **India's Myanmar Policy since 1988: Between Democratic Ideals and Geostrategic Imperatives**

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## *Abstract*

*India has had a long history of relations with Myanmar (Burma) even prior to their independence, as both were British colonial possessions. Relations since Myanmar's independence in 1948 were cordial such that both countries even shared similar views on non-alignment. Although in 1964, Myanmar nationalized privately-owned enterprises that negatively impacted on the livelihood of Indians in the country, relations between both remained cordial, though at times low key. In addition, Myanmar's self-imposed policy of isolation was another major reason for the state of relations between both during this period. In 1988, when major demonstrations against military rule rocked Myanmar, India became one of the major critics of the latter's poor human rights record and a staunch advocate for the return of democracy to the country. It was obvious that for India, upholding its democratic ideals became the cornerstone of its policy toward Myanmar. However, since the early 1990s, India has changed its earlier stance to one that is currently shaped by geostrategic and geo-economic concerns. This shift has been due to at least three major factors namely the China factor and Myanmar's abundant natural resources.*

## **Introduction**

India has had a long history of relations with Myanmar (formerly Burma) dating back to the third century BC, namely in the areas of trade, commerce, religion, philosophy and culture. Even during colonial rule, both countries shared similar colonial legacies for being British colonial possessions in the 19th and 20th centuries, and in fact, until 1937, Myanmar was administratively part of British India.

During the early years of their independence, relations were cordial, such that both countries shared similar views concerning the idea of non-alignment. In fact, Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru and Myanmar's Premier, U Nu, were both the founding fathers of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1955. Although in 1962 Myanmar's military usurped power from the democratically elected government of U Nu, India continued to maintain cordial relations with Yangon (Rangoon). In fact, relations

between New Delhi and Yangon remained close from 1962 till 1988, in spite of Myanmar's self-imposed policy of isolation.

However, in 1988, India shifted its policy of accommodating Yangon to one that became extremely critical of the latter mainly due to Myanmar's human rights violations on the country's proponents of democracy. It was during these years that India became the voice and hope for Myanmar's proponents of democracy, often ostracizing the Yangon military junta and calling for its international isolation. However, this policy was short-lived, as by the early 1990s, New Delhi began softening its stance toward Myanmar's military junta, in line with its "Look East Policy". The shift that New Delhi considers as a pragmatic policy was mainly due to at least three major factors namely China's growing presence in Myanmar, economic opportunities in Myanmar and India's troubled northeast region.<sup>1</sup> This paper attempts to discuss India's Myanmar policy since 1988 and the changes that have taken place in the policy since the early 1990s.

### **Relations from 1948-1988**

Since Myanmar's independence on 4 January 1948, leaders from both Myanmar and India had established close relations which was mainly due to the personal friendship and mutual trust that existed between India's Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru and U Nu, Myanmar's Premier. On the occasion of Myanmar's independence on 4 January 1948 and while welcoming Myanmar to the family of independent nations, Nehru stated that:<sup>2</sup>

*As in the past, so in the future, the people of India will stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Burma, and whether we have to share good fortune or ill fortune, we shall share it together. This is a great and solemn day not only for Burma, but for India, and the whole of Asia.*

At the economic level, India depended on rice from Myanmar, and in fact, was the latter's largest rice importer in the 1950s. Therefore, to further cement relations between both, on 7 July 1951, India and Myanmar signed a Treaty of Friendship. The fraternal nature of relations between both countries, at least from 1948 till 1962, was mainly due to the rapport that existed between Nehru and U Nu. As one source points out that "*they [Nehru and U Nu] built a close rapport and the two countries benefited from this.*"<sup>3</sup>

When the Myanmar army seized power in March 1962 and while the cordial relations between both countries continued, there were, however, some ups and downs. This was mainly due to a number of factors, namely Myanmar's self-imposed policy of isolation after 1962, its drive toward socialism that saw amongst others the nationalization of private enterprises, its improved relations with China and India's decision to provide exile to U Nu, Myanmar's deposed Prime Minister.

Further, in May 1963 and in view of its declining trade with Myanmar, India's Minister of External Affairs paid a three-day visit to Yangon, with a view of improving

its trade with the latter. This was soon, in July 1963, followed by another visit by India's Trade Minister for the same reason.

However, by 1964, India's relations with Myanmar were strained over the question of some one million Indians living in Myanmar. In March 1964, Myanmar's supremo, General Ne Win, nationalized privately-owned businesses in the country, which in turn, affected the livelihood of Indians who at that time controlled some 60 percent of the country's trade and commerce. With nationalization, Indian-owned assets worth Kyat (K) 60 million were now in the hands of Ne Win's revolutionary government. Although the Myanmar government promised compensation for the Indians that were dislodged by this new policy, the money never came. Under these circumstances, a large number of Indians decided to leave the country and head for India. To facilitate the exodus, in May 1964, an agreement was signed between both countries for the repatriation of Indians which witnessed some 37,165 Indians leaving Myanmar for India. To ease the situation, in September 1964, India's External Affairs Minister, Swaran Singh, paid a four-day goodwill visit to Yangon, where he met Ne Win and discussed problems in India-Myanmar relations.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, between April 1963 and June 1965, some 100,000 Indians left Myanmar for India, such that the issue, to some extent, impacted negatively on relations between both countries. In an attempt to solve the issue and ensure that it did not derail bilateral relations, a number of visits were made by top Indian officials, that included the Indian Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Foreign Secretary. At the same time, Indian officials in Yangon continued convincing the Indians in Myanmar that "*the Revolutionary government is not driving away foreigners, nor is the Indian government asking the Indians to come back home.*"<sup>5</sup> What finally brought relations back on track was the visit by Indian Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, to Yangon, in December 1965. One source reveals that "*Shastri's visit to Burma in December 1965 achieved a solid advance in Indo-Burma relations... tension that resulted from the nationalization of private business in 1964 died down.*"<sup>6</sup> To capitalize on the visit by Shastri, Ne Win reciprocated in March 1966, by making a visit to India that was aimed at improving relations between both countries as well as getting acquainted with India's new Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi.

The improvement in relations was due not only to the initiatives taken by Indian policy makers but also to Myanmar's sour relations with China. This was because in the 1950s and 1960s, the remnants of the Kuomintang (KMT) were based along the China-Myanmar border and frequently used Myanmar's territory as a sanctuary every time China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched offensives against them.<sup>7</sup>

In 1967, India and Myanmar saw further top level diplomatic exchanges, which included one by India's Foreign Minister, M. C. Chagla, in January 1967. Apart from that, an Indian delegation visited Yangon in March 1967, where the India-Burma

Boundary Agreement was signed, with a joint commission established to demarcate the 1,600-kilometre land border between both. As for the exodus of Myanmar's Indians to India was concerned, as of December 1966, some 152,793 had left the country.<sup>8</sup> In spite of this, relations between both remained cordial, with a number of high-level visits from India, which also included one by Mrs. Gandhi herself, in March 1969.

However, by 1971, once again relations between both took a low key mainly due to India's involvement in the war in East Pakistan, which later culminated in the creation of Bangladesh. While recognizing Bangladesh, Myanmar stated that "*it did not accept on principle the solution of a country's internal problems by means of direct help of intervention of a foreign country's armed organisations.*"<sup>9</sup> An immediate impact of this statement was the drop in the number of high-level visits from the Indian side to Yangon — until the visit by Swaran Singh, India's Foreign Minister, in 1973. A year later, in 1974, Ne Win made visits to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, where he called for solutions for lasting peace in the sub-continent and for keeping the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace.<sup>10</sup>

After the 1974 visit by Ne Win and although relations between India and Myanmar remained cordial, it was, however, clear that Myanmar was moving away from India and fostering a close relationship with China. At the same time, in 1979, Myanmar withdrew from the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) citing reasons that the movement had drifted away from its original course by admitting new members that did not subscribe to the declared aims of the movement. For almost 12 years from 1974 till 1986, relations between both countries remained low key until the visit by India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in December 1987. During the visit, the major issues discussed were the status of Indians in Myanmar that had been denied full citizenship by a 1982 act, the demarcation of boundary between both countries and the presence of Indian Naga guerillas on Myanmar's soil.<sup>11</sup> In fact, it was during this visit too that Rajiv Gandhi invited Myanmar to join the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) — which Myanmar declined.

It can be observed that from 1962 till 1988, India practiced a policy that was very much accommodative toward Myanmar and the testimony of this was that while Myanmar declared a self-imposed policy of isolation, India continued to engage the country at many levels, albeit the fact that in reality, it was engaging a military regime that had usurped power from a democratically elected government. Further, when Ne Win nationalized private enterprises that negatively affected the country's Indian community, New Delhi continued to work hard to ensure that the decision did not derail the good relations that had existed since 1948. However, one of the major characteristic of Indo-Myanmar relations from 1962 till 1987 was the ups and downs, with New Delhi constantly working to ensure that relations remained on track.

### **Relations from 1988 to 1993: Standing Up for Democracy**

In 1988, when major demonstrations against the military rocked Myanmar, India became a staunch critic of the country's poor human rights record as well as a strong advocate for the return of democracy to the country. In fact, India was one of the first few countries in the world to offer political refuge to Myanmar's political dissidents. India adopted an extremely critical view of Myanmar, often lambasting the military junta for its human rights abuses and failure to democratize, such that upholding its democratic ideals became the cornerstone of India's policy toward Myanmar, at least in the late-1980s.

On 10 September 1988, India became one of the first countries in the world to throw its support for Myanmar's democratic opposition and adopt a refugee policy for the thousands of dissidents who fled Myanmar. Refugee camps were built in Manipur and Mizoram, India's northeastern states, and on 25 October 1988, Indian Minister of External Affairs, P. V. Narashima Rao, stated that India would not turn away any genuine Myanmar refugee. Further, on 4 August 1989, New Delhi urged the Myanmar junta to release the country's democracy icon, Aung San Suu Kyi as well as Tin U, both of whom had been under house arrest since July 1989. At the same time, the Indian government also started the Burmese Language Service of the All-India Radio (AIR) as an avenue for Myanmar's opposition groups in India to garner international support<sup>12</sup> so much so that the news service was considered "*a major irritant to the SLORC [State Law and Order Restoration Council], with its outspoken broadcasts often including statements issued by rebel groups and interviews with Burmese dissidents.*"<sup>13</sup> In fact, the AIR's Burmese Language Service — alongside the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) — was not only extremely popular among the junta's critics in the international community but also boasted of a wide audience in Myanmar itself.<sup>14</sup> Further, India also refused to appoint its ambassador to Yangon for about a year as a sign of protest over the Myanmar junta's brutal tactics toward the democratic opposition in the country. In fact, it was only on 27 September 1990, that India finally appointed its ambassador to Myanmar.

One controversial event that also negatively impacted on relations between both was when two Myanmar nationals hijacked a Yangon-bound Thai airliner to Kolkata (Calcutta) on 10 November 1990. Although the episode ended peacefully when the two hijackers surrendered to the Indian authorities, but when they were later released on bail, Myanmar's military junta was simply infuriated. In fact, a highly confidential letter circulated amongst the Myanmar military junta that eventually leaked out, categorically stated that India was a country which "*encourages and supports internal insurgents... and interferes in [Myanmar's] internal affairs... [acts which are] not compatible with the [expected] behaviour of a friendly neighbour...*"<sup>15</sup> All the same time, the Myanmar junta also increased its military build-up along its border with India and created new regional commands for the Sagaing Division and Chin State, in the northwest of the country. Apart from being a show of force gesture, the move was also aimed at suppressing insurgency in Myanmar's troubled northwest region.

At the international level, India took a stand similar to most Western countries by becoming a staunch critic of the Myanmar junta, frequently calling for its international isolation. In fact, from 1991 onward, India became the chief proponent of the United Nations General Assembly's (UNGA) resolutions condemning Myanmar for its abysmal human rights record.

Although, on the one hand political relations between both continued to deteriorate, on the other, trade between India and Myanmar increased. While India's imports from Myanmar were valued at US\$57 million in 1988, by 1991, it had increased to US\$100 million. However, India's exports remained low and were valued at US\$5.7 million in 1991.<sup>16</sup> At another level, relations between New Delhi and Yangon nose dived again when several thousand Nagas from Myanmar's southwest fled into India's northeast, with the Myanmar army pursuing them into India's territory.

While India continued its policy of criticizing the Myanmar junta and supporting the country's pro-democracy movement, Myanmar, on the other hand, began drifting closer into the Chinese orbit — a development that eventually became a thorn in the flesh for New Delhi. In fact, it was therefore under these circumstances that India undertook a review of its Myanmar policy that eventually resulted in the abandonment of its earlier stance of advocating democratization in Myanmar, to one of building a close rapport and accommodating the Myanmar junta.

### **India's Look East Policy: Indo-Myanmar Relations since 1993**

Since 1993, India has changed its earlier stance from one that stressed on its democratic ideals to one that is currently shaped by geostrategic imperatives. As such, India has toned down its critical stance and co-opted to work with Myanmar's military junta. The fact that India's past policy of being a staunch critic of the military junta has long been abandoned was even evident in the aftermath of the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar in September 2007, when the Myanmar military violently suppressed demonstrations by Buddhists monks. Commenting on the issue, Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, stated that "*violence and suppression of human rights hurts us... having said that, we have to recognize that Myanmar is our next door neighbor and sometimes it does not serve the objective you have in mind by going public with condemnations.*"<sup>17</sup> In reality, this comes as no surprise as in January 2007, India's External Affairs Minister, Pranab Mukherjee had echoed a similar view when he stated that:<sup>18</sup>

*We are not interested in exporting our own ideology. We are a democracy and we would like democracy to flourish everywhere. But this is something for every country to decide for itself.*

In fact, it was during these demonstrations that India signed a gas exploration deal with Myanmar. Between 24 and 26 September 2007, India's Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas, Murli Deora, signed a deal worth US\$150 million with Myanmar Oil



and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) for natural deep-water gas exploration in Myanmar's Rakhine (Arakan) State. In the same year as well, the Export-Import Bank of India extended a US\$20 million credit line to Myanmar<sup>19</sup>, in addition to a soft loan of US\$56.35 million that was granted by the Indian government to Myanmar in 2003.

This shift in Indian policy toward Myanmar has been due to at least three major factors, namely, the China factor, Myanmar's abundant natural resources and India's troubled northeast region. It is evident that the need to circumvent China's growing interest in Myanmar since 1989 has become the cornerstone of India's Myanmar policy, especially in view of the close relations between the top members of Myanmar's military junta and the Chinese leaders. In addition, Myanmar's rich natural resources, and especially India's search for energy security, are other considerations for the change in India's foreign policy posture toward Myanmar.

Although India's policy toward Myanmar saw marked changes in 1993, the initiatives had started even earlier. In 1991, India acceded to pressure from the Myanmar military junta, and barred Than Than Nu, the daughter of U Nu, from broadcasting over AIR's Burmese Language Service for frequently using "abusive" language attacking Myanmar's military junta.

By early 1993, India ceased its earlier policy of isolating Myanmar to one that stressed on "constructive engagement". In the light of this development, in March 1993, J. N. Dixit, India's Foreign Secretary, made a ground-breaking visit to Yangon where many major issues in bilateral relations were discussed. Also in 1993, India sent a trade delegation to Myanmar, and later, signed an agreement to cooperate on the suppression of narcotics trafficking across their common border. Further developments in 1994 clearly pointed to a change in India's policy toward Myanmar with a number of high-level visits from India to Myanmar. For example, in May 1994, General Bipin Chandra, the Indian army chief, visited Yangon, thus becoming the first Indian army chief to visit the country. In the same year and apart from exchanges of high-level trade delegations, preparations were also underway for the opening of Tamu-Moreh border crossing from India's Manipur state to Myanmar's Sagaing Division.

Since 1993, not only has India moved closer to the military junta in Myanmar but has also increased its economic presence in Myanmar through foreign investments, infrastructure projects as well as the provision of foreign aid. During the last few years, high-level visits have become a fairly frequent affair in the relations between both. Apart from the visit by Myanmar's top number two general, Maung Aye, in 2003, Indian Vice-President, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, too visited Myanmar in November 2003 — making the latter the highest-ranking Indian official to visit Yangon since the visit by Rajiv Gandhi in 1987. Further, in October 2004, Myanmar's supremo, Senior General Than Shwe visited India as the country's head of state, and in March 2006, Indian President, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, visited Myanmar, thus making him the first ever Indian head of state

to have visited the country. Apart from this and at the military level, visits by Indian army leaders also have become frequent.

A major factor that called for a review of New Delhi's Myanmar policy in the early 1990s was the China factor. Since 1989, when some Western countries imposed arms embargos on Myanmar, China moved in to become the country's chief supplier of military hardware. In the 1990s alone, Chinese sale of military hardware to Myanmar was estimated between US\$1–2 billion. In addition, its economic presence in Myanmar has grown phenomenally over the last two decades, such that China currently ranks as Myanmar's major trading partner and investor. More importantly, a strong Chinese presence in Myanmar has alarmed New Delhi, especially its military activities in the country, giving an impression that it had in fact encircled India.<sup>20</sup> These, amongst others, include China's alleged operation of signal intelligence (SIGNIT) on Great Coco Island, Ramree Island off the Rakhine coast, Hainggyi Island at the estuary of the Ayeyarwady Delta, Monkey Point in Yangon and Zadetkyi Kyun off the Tanintharyi Division that collects intelligence of air and naval movements in Bay of Bengal as well as on India's presence in the Andaman Islands.<sup>21</sup> In addition, as China is close to Pakistan, the latter has been making overtures to establish close relations with Yangon — another reason that alarmed the Indian policy makers. Commenting on increased Chinese presence in Myanmar, Brahma Chellaney reiterates that:<sup>22</sup>

*By the time India reversed that policy, it realized that it had lost Myanmar to China... So the shift from a moral, value-laden based foreign policy to realpolitik on Myanmar came after India burned its hands and feet...*

Another major reason why India has abandoned its earlier Myanmar policy is evident in India's search for markets and resources, especially in the oil and natural gas sector — where Myanmar has abundant resources. As of 2006, India was Myanmar's fourth largest trading partner, after Thailand, China and Singapore, as well as the country's second largest export market after Thailand. Bilateral trade (including border trade in the Tamu-Moreh area) between both in 2005/2006 stood at US\$557.68 million, with border trade valued at US\$15.76 million. India's investments in Myanmar, as of January 2006, were valued at US\$35.8 million.<sup>23</sup> While bilateral trade in 2000 was at US\$227.3 million, in 2006 it was already valued at US\$750 million. For the same period, India's exports to Myanmar were valued at US\$38 million and US\$612 million, respectively. The items of export were diversified and consisted of finished goods like pharmaceuticals, iron and steel, electrical machinery and equipment. As for India's imports from Myanmar, these mainly comprised of two major products namely edible oil and wood (including wood products).<sup>24</sup>

As a move to further cement India's economic relations with Myanmar, in August 1997, Myanmar was admitted to the Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and



Thailand–Economic Cooperation (BIMST–EC) which aims at promoting economic cooperation among the littoral states in the Bay of Bengal. It was initially formed in June 1997 with by Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand and was then known as BIST–EC.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Myanmar is also a member of the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) that was established in November 2000 and currently comprises of India, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The MGC was formed to enhance cooperation in four major areas namely, tourism, culture, education and transportation.<sup>26</sup>

Although India's economic interests in Myanmar span an array of sectors, its main focus, however, is in the oil and natural gas sector. Coincidentally, in terms of total inflow of foreign investments, almost two-third of foreign direct investments into Myanmar is concentrated in the oil and gas sector. In reality, although India's trade with Myanmar is growing, its investments, however, still lag far behind many other countries. In fact, as of September 2006, India's investments in Myanmar were valued at US\$35 million, which accounted to a mere 0.3 percent of the total foreign investments in the country.<sup>27</sup>

Apart from the above, another major factor that brought about a policy review was the situation in India's northeast region that borders Myanmar. For decades, rebels in northeast India, have used Myanmar as sanctuary — a fact that has very much undermined India's security in the region. It was a known fact that the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) as well as some Manipur insurgent groups, had for long maintained their bases on the Myanmar side.<sup>28</sup> In the light of these developments, New Delhi finds it pertinent to cooperate with Myanmar to obtain a long term solution to the problem in its northeastern states.<sup>29</sup> Apart from the presence of insurgency in the region, the Indian states of Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland also houses some more that 100,000 Myanmar refugees — a number that increase every time the Myanmar junta launches military operations on its side of the border.

As such, the Indian army not only undertakes joint operations with the Myanmar army, but New Delhi also has long-term development plans for the region. These include the development of the Sittwe (Akyab) port in Myanmar's Rakhine State, which is also strategically located in the Bay of Bengal. According to one source, India has been given the right, by the Myanmar junta, "to build, operate and use the port." As the Sittwe port is located off the Kaladan River, a river that flows through the Indian state of Mizoram into Myanmar, India plans to develop a waterway and roadway, linking Mizoram with Sittwe. The project, known as the Kaladan Multi Model Transit Transport Project, costing some US\$135 million over the next five years, would enable India not only to penetrate Myanmar economically, but in the long run, bring about a peaceful solution to its troubled northeast, especially by spurring development.<sup>30</sup>

A recent report of 2009 reveals that India's economic policy toward Myanmar has yielded some benefits in that India is not only the latter's fourth largest trading

partner, but also absorbs some 25 percent of Myanmar's total exports, thus making it the latter's second largest export market after Thailand. Bilateral trade between both in 2008/2009 alone amounted to some US\$951.3 million, with Myanmar's exports to India at US\$805.1 million, while its imports from India were at US\$146.2 million. All the same, India's contracted investments in Myanmar as of January 2008 were at US\$219.57 million, with the lion's share of some US\$137 million or 62.3 percent of its total investments, in the oil and gas sector.<sup>31</sup>

It was also reported that many more Indian companies were keen to invest in Myanmar's information technology (IT) and education sectors. In fact, in 2008 alone, both India and Myanmar had cooperated in the establishment of 11 centres for enhancing IT skills in major cities such as Yangon and Mandalay — a project that was undertaken between India's Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (CDAC) and Myanmar Post and Telecommunications (MPT). The project also saw Myanmar sending some 100 of its civil servants to India for training. In addition to this, was cooperation between both countries in a 640-kilometre-long Myanmar-India optical fiber link project costing some US\$7 million, that connects Moreh, a town in India's northeast, with Mandalay. On the education front, it was revealed that as of 2008, India had granted some 150 scholarships to Myanmar students to pursue higher education in India and was planning to increase the number of scholarships.<sup>32</sup>

According to Haacke, while India's current posture toward Myanmar is predominantly based on geostrategic and economic imperatives, for Myanmar, on the other hand, its decision to mend ties and seek closer cooperation with India is based on at least three major reasons. Politically, close relations with India has increased Myanmar's "circle of friends", especially as India has halted its strong criticism of the country's poor human rights record. In addition, it has also provided Myanmar with an avenue to counter-balance and offset China's strong presence in the country and has, to some extent, boosted Myanmar's international image as well as the ruling junta's legitimacy. Economically, Myanmar's trade with India is considered extremely important for the former, especially taking into account the large surplus that Myanmar enjoys. In addition, India is also seen by Myanmar as a source of credit and capital in its endeavor to upgrade the country's backward infrastructure. All the same, it has also provided Myanmar with the opportunity to participate in the Indian-sponsored sub-regional economic and tourism schemes mentioned earlier. In terms of defense and apart from the procurement of arms from India, cooperation in this area allows Myanmar to stabilize its troubled northwest region, especially the Chin State, Sagaing Division and the Kachin State, where insurgency remains a problem.<sup>33</sup>

### **Conclusion: Possible Future Directions**

It is evident from the discussion above that there has been a paradigm shift in India's Myanmar policy since 1993, from one of being extremely critical of the Myanmar military junta to a policy of accommodating the latter. In fact, looking back at the history of relations between both countries since 1948, it is in fact not the first time that New Delhi has employed an accommodative stance toward Yangon. When General Ne Win started his nationalization program and despite the fact that it involved large numbers of Myanmar's Indians who later left for India, India continued to accommodate the Myanmar junta, mainly to ensure that relations between both were not derailed.

Egreteau argues that this new shift in Indian policy marks a move from idealism to realism because India had finally realized that its democratic ideals and goals were not entirely fulfilling, and as such, had to seriously consider its geo-strategic concerns as well. In fact, Ganesan asserts that India's policy toward Myanmar since 1992 *"has been considerably less ideological and much more realist in its orientation."*<sup>34</sup> Perhaps theoretically speaking it is, but looking back at recent history it is obvious that this is not the first time that India has accommodated Myanmar's military junta.

With this shift in policy, although India has engaged the Myanmar junta in a limited fashion, it has, however, failed to circumvent increased Chinese presence and influence in Myanmar thus far.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, there are no indications that the military junta is willing to undertake constructive political reform, but instead has further tightened its grip on power. Hence, for New Delhi, the present policy would probably appear to be the most suitable in dealing with the military junta as political change is indeed remote in the near future, coupled with the fact that the latter is also highly unpredictable and often makes decisions in a whimsical fashion. A case point was in December 2005, when the Myanmar junta decided to grant China a concession over an offshore bloc that is estimated to hold some 6.5 million cubic feet of natural gas — in spite of early indications that it would be granted to India. In reality, the Myanmar junta too has been tactfully using India to balance Chinese influence in Myanmar — a presence that makes some top members of the junta highly uncomfortable.

On another note, India probably has to review its current Myanmar policy based on the arguments that has been proposed by Levesque. He argues that India has two options when it comes to dealing with Myanmar in future. Firstly, is a scenario in which the junta maintains its status quo, where the author argues that India's current policy is considered untenable in the long run for a number of reasons.

Although the junta is obviously using India to counter-balance Chinese presence in Myanmar, but in reality, as India often plays a second fiddle role, it is highly unlikely that it would be able to overtake China's position in Myanmar. Moreover, some top members of the military junta are in fact closer to Beijing, when compared with New Delhi.<sup>36</sup> Under these circumstances not only would India fail to contain Chinese

influence, but would make little headway when it comes to penetrating the Myanmar economy and solving its own problems in its northeast region.<sup>37</sup>

A more viable long-term solution for India, and related to the second scenario as argued by Levesque, would be for India to engage and persuade the Myanmar junta to undertake administrative and economic reforms, stressing economic rights over political freedom, hence positing economic development within reach. As such, the junta should be persuaded and convinced to undertake the necessary measures to ensure that its new policies would stimulate economic growth, which in turn, can reduce international pressure on both itself and India. According to Levesque:<sup>38</sup>

*Change in Myanmar will very unlikely see the advent of democracy. India should, therefore, bank on a military regime, but try to enhance its reliability. The evolution of the Burmese junta into an illiberal but efficient regime is a very plausible scenario... Convincing the generals of the utility positive economic and administrative reform should be possible, as it will open up opportunities for the Burmese and crown the regime with a legitimacy that is presently non-existent. India, for economic reasons as well as security considerations, would stand to gain to greatly...*

More importantly, for India, its Myanmar policy over the last 15 years has yielded, at the very best, limited results. Like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) policy of constructive engagement that has been doomed an abject failure for some time now, India's similar approach is unlikely to produce any desirable results. As such, India probably has two options namely to work on Levesque's second suggestion or to widen the scope of its policy beyond security and natural resources, and engage Myanmar in many more areas, as well as initiate a wider dialogue with the junta, that should include China, ASEAN, Japan and the West as well.<sup>39</sup> Only then can India's Myanmar policy produce tangible results that would benefit India and the international community in the long run. As long as India does not undertake another review of its current Myanmar policy, it will still be caught in the web of its geostrategic imperatives and continue sacrificing its democratic ideals.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rüländ argues that apart from the three reasons mentioned above, there were another two concerns as well. These include Pakistan's growing relations with the junta in Yangon as well as India's efforts to improve its relations with countries of the Southeast Asian region in the broader context of its "Look East Policy". See Jürgen Rüländ, "Burma: Ten Years after the Uprising: The Regional Dimension," in Robert H. Taylor (ed.), *Burma: Political Economy under Military Rule*, London: Hurst & Co., 2001, p. 147. While these concerns were undoubtedly important, yet they were of lesser significance for most Indian policy makers who tended to argue along the three mentioned in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Aung Zaw, et. al., *Challenges to Democratization in Burma: Perspectives on Multilateral and Bilateral Responses*, Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), 2001, p. 89. See also, Maung Myint, *The International Response to the Democracy Movement in Burma since 1962*, Stockholm: Center for Pacific Asia Studies, Stockholm University, 2000, pp. 128-129; and Jürgen Haacke, *Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Domestic Influences and International Implications*, Adelphi Paper No. 381, London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 25-39.

<sup>3</sup> Col. R. Hariharan, "India-Myanmar-China Relations," *Asian Tribune*, 22 July 2007, <http://www.asiantribune.com/index.php?q=node/6641>

<sup>4</sup> "Burma," *Asia Yearbook 1965*, Hong Kong: Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER), 1965, p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> "Burma," *Asia Yearbook 1966*, Hong Kong: FEER, 1966, pp. 96-97.

<sup>6</sup> "Burma," *Asia Yearbook 1967*, Hong Kong: FEER, 1967, p. 124. See also, Renaud Egretteau, *Wooing the Generals: India's New Burma Policy*, New Delhi: Authors Press and Centre de Sciences Humaines, 2003, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Jatswan S. Sidhu, "Hubungan Myanmar-China: Dari Konfrontasi Ke Arah Kerjasama," in Obaidellah Mohamad (ed.), *China: Isu dan Hubungan Luar*, Kuala Lumpur: Institut Pengajian China, Universiti Malaya, 2004, p. 191.

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