

ISA S Brief

No. 124 – Date: 18 August 2009

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‘Silence is Golden’: India’s Current Position on Myanmar

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Abstract

There has been increasing international and regional criticism of Myanmar’s military regime in the wake of Aung San Suu Kyi’s recently-completed trial. The Indian government’s position, however, has been prominent for its silence on this issue. This paper points to three major factors for India’s silence – the China factor, its energy needs and the situation in its northeastern region – and concludes that this Indian position will persist into the near future.

Introduction

On 11 August 2009, a court in Rangoon found Suu Kyi guilty of breaching the terms of her house arrest and sentenced her to three years imprisonment, a term that was commuted to 18 months of house arrest by Myanmar’s ruling military regime.

Exactly two months before this, in the midst of Suu Kyi’s trial, the United States-based non-government organisation, Freedom House, issued a press release urging the Indian government to “break its silence over the sham trial of Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and to pressure Rangoon to unconditionally release the Nobel peace laureate immediately”. Just the day before, 110 Indian members of parliament signed a petition, initiated by the Indian Parliamentarians Forum for Democracy in Burma, urging India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to secure the release of Suu Kyi and support the reinstatement of democratic governance in Burma.

To add to this pressure on the Indian government, several member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, who have traditionally advocated a softer “constructive engagement” approach to the regime in Myanmar, publicly called upon Myanmar to release Suu Kyi and to hold free and fair elections in the country as soon as possible. In addition, even China, seen as Myanmar’s most vocal and steadfast ally in the face of constant international criticism, saw it fit to endorse the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s trip to Myanmar in July 2009 to seek a meeting with both Myanmar’s military rulers and Suu Kyi (the latter request was rejected by the military regime).

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Despite this seemingly growing sense of frustration amongst Myanmar's traditional allies, India has stuck to its policy of silence on Myanmar and Suu Kyi's trial. In fact, it went even further than keeping silent – in 2009, it refused to formally continue its participation in the multilateral Focus Group on Myanmar (formed in early 2008 under the United Nations auspices comprising India, China, Indonesia, Myanmar and the United Nations), one of the few international forums that Myanmar agreed, at least symbolically, to engage with. The Indian government cited “national interests” as the reason for its pullout. For many, this silence is frustrating as well as difficult to comprehend.

There are three major reasons why silence serves as the most appropriate policy for the Indian government on this issue. The first is the perception of growing Chinese influence over the military regime in Myanmar, with its attendant political and strategic implications for India. The second factor relates to issues of energy security and India's growing need for new sources of fuel to feed its ever-increasing energy requirements. The third set of factors is chiefly concerned with India's border security in the context of insurgent groups in the country's northeast and cross-border trade.

The China Factor

Since 1992-93, there has been a decided shift in India's attitude towards Myanmar because of the perceived failure of its Myanmar policy prior to this period. There was a perception that Indian policy in the pre-1992 period, which was one of being publicly sympathetic and supportive of Myanmar's democracy movement, had been detrimental to India's strategic and political interests. While the Indian government was being openly vocal on human rights and democracy in Myanmar during this phase, China was seen as increasingly entrenching its dominant position with the ruling regime in Myanmar by acting as the leading defender of the country in forums such as the United Nations, in the face of fierce international criticism against the regime's human rights record.

From the Indian perspective, China has gained, and India has lost, significant strategic space as a result of such engagement. A key strategic space in this regard is the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Myanmar's ruling regime has invited China to help modernise and develop Myanmar's naval bases at Hanggyi, the Coco islands, Akyab and Mergui. There is a lingering belief among Indian officials that China is using or will, in the future, use these bases, especially the Coco Islands, as listening posts to conduct surveillance on Indian military activity and bases in the Bay of Bengal (which is the northeastern part of the IOR), the most important amongst which is the Indian tri-services facilities base at Port Blair, on South Andaman Island.

Besides the obvious negative implications with regards to surveillance, Indian officials are also concerned about the longer-term implication of the Chinese navy establishing its naval presence in the wider IOR via naval bases in Myanmar. Competing with China for strategic space and, thus, strategic influence in the Bay of Bengal and the wider IOR is a worrying prospect for Indian leaders. The fact that an estimated 40 percent of the world's offshore oil production comes from the Indian Ocean and that it carries a significant amount of petroleum traffic from the oilfields of the Persian Gulf and Indonesia explains the strategic importance India attaches to the IOR.

Despite repeated assurances from Myanmar's military that it has not leased out any of its naval bases to China and the Indian military conceding, in 2005, that reports of Chinese bases

in Myanmar were incorrect, all is not well as far as Indian officials are concerned. The dominant opinion in Delhi is that Myanmar might, in future, be convinced into providing its naval bases to China, especially if China remains the country's most important defender in the face of increased international pressure and criticism. Keeping silent over Myanmar's domestic troubles seems to be the best policy at the moment for India. Joining international criticism will just drive Myanmar closer to China, with its associated impact on Indian strategic interests, according to this perception.

India's Energy Needs

Much has been written about India's search for new sources of energy, specifically oil and gas, to feed its growing economy. In this regard, Myanmar's proven gas reserves of 2.54 trillion cubic metres and oil reserves of 3.2 billion barrels are not something the Indian government can easily ignore. Since the early 1980s, Myanmar has been inviting foreign companies to explore for oil and gas in its territory and, since 2005, it has been awarding offshore blocks for gas production to foreign companies. In late 2008, Myanmar and China signed an agreement in which the China National Petroleum Corporation would construct a gas pipeline transporting Myanmar's offshore gas from the latter's west coast port of Kyaukpyu to China's Yunnan province. The contract to produce the gas itself has been given to a consortium comprising Daewoo International (South Korea, 60 percent stake), ONGC Videsh, the overseas arm of India's state-run Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (20 percent stake), Gas Authority of India Limited (10 percent stake) and KOGAS (South Korea, 10 percent stake).

There were hopes that, despite this pipeline, because of the Indian stake in this consortium, some of Myanmar's gas might still find its way into India. However, attempts to build a gas pipeline from Myanmar to India via Bangladesh ran into difficulties from the start in the face of larger bilateral difficulties in the India-Bangladesh relationship. The alternative of building a pipeline that will pass through India's northeastern region to reach West Bengal was officially shelved in July 2009, with the economic viability of this project deemed not feasible.

It is obvious to Indian officials that India has missed this first opportunity of securing the passage of Myanmar's gas to India. This notwithstanding, India is hopeful, given the untapped amount of both gas and oil reserves in Myanmar, that another opportunity will arise in the near future. It is, however, also mindful of the fact that astute diplomacy will have to be the basis of the Indian approach towards Myanmar for such an opportunity to present itself again. It is widely understood that an important part of such astute diplomacy involves staying on a friendly footing with the military regime in Myanmar.

India's Northeastern Region

India's northeastern states – Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram – are home to tribes that have ethnic links to their brethren on the Myanmar side of the Myanmar-India border. Separatist violence has been on the rise within India's northeastern states, especially since the 1990s, led chiefly by groups claiming to represent these ethnic groups. This has added an important dimension to the way in which the Indian state has recently sought to approach its relations with Myanmar.

Besides the obvious need for co-operation with Myanmar's government in dealing with violent insurgent groups, who have camps located within the Myanmar side of the border, Indian officials also see trade and development as important issues in its Myanmar policy vis-à-vis its northeastern states. There is an acknowledgement in New Delhi that dealing with insurgency in the northeast requires measures that go beyond mere military approaches. Since April 1995, when the First Border Trade Agreement between the two countries was implemented, there was hope that increased border trade would bring increased investment, development and prosperity to the northeastern states. There were also hopes that building greater connectivity to Myanmar from the northeast will help connect the further reaches of mainland Southeast Asia to India. Thus far, such hopes have not been realised. Due to a number of factors, trade at the border is at the moment effectively down to only two or three items (compared to the 40 items listed in the trade agreement).

Indian officials have, however, pushed on with building connectivity between the northeastern states and Myanmar. One initiative is the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Facility which aims to establish connectivity between Indian ports on its eastern side and the Sittwe port in Myanmar through a network of rivers and roads. For such initiatives to develop and deliver the type of connectivity and related development sought by the Indian government, it realises that long-term diplomatic engagement with Myanmar's government is essential.

Conclusion

Three major factors shape India's present policy towards Myanmar. In all likelihood, these factors will continue to dictate Indian policy towards the military regime into the near future. However, the tipping point for India's Myanmar policy might arrive if or when continued domestic resistance to the regime in Myanmar spills over the border into India, with increasing numbers of refugees, and large amounts of narcotics and small arms making their way across the shared border. Till such a scenario presents itself, it appears that 'silence is golden' for India's Myanmar policy.

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