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A New Myanmar on South Asia's Borders: Changes and Challenges

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As Myanmar's icon of democracy, the Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, recently walked towards the Parliamentary Chamber to take her seat for the first time, a journalist asked her if it was going to be a historic day for her country. Her response was as laconic as it was profound: "Only time can tell", she observed. And she is right!

Myanmar is at a cross roads. Its future will hinge on choices it makes, the path it decides to take henceforth. What it expects from the international community is not direction, or advice or guidance with regard to the choice of the road. But support, empathy and understanding, and when asked for, aid and assistance, as Myanmar moves forward along the route of its own choosing. Myanmar must be allowed to be in the driver's seat of its own destiny. Today that is the emerging consensus among the nations of the world.

It was not a consensus that could have been easily arrived at. Much of it was the fault of the generals of that country, though others around the world had their share of the blame. Led by the ageing Senior General Than Shwe and others of his ilk, they tightened their stranglehold over the country, changed its name from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar' arguing that it was more in consonance with their tradition, refused to recognize the election results of May 1990 won by Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), and in a controversial move, shifted the capital from the historic Yangon, to the new site of Nay Pyi Taw, projecting it as being more central and thereby secure, presumably from a possible Western maritime intervention.

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Thereafter, in what was seemingly an ‘Alice in Wonderland’ trial with a ‘sentence first, verdict afterwards, the junta incarcerated Suu Kyi. Under a Constitution crafted to suit the military’s purposes, elections were held in 2010 which the NLD, understandably, boycotted.

The West, in particular, was not amused. Its apprehensions, some genuine and some not, were reinforced by a number of other factors. The generals in Myanmar were intolerant of dissent, for which stiff prison terms were imposed. Two Myanmar defectors code-named ‘Moe Joe’ and ‘Tin Min’ reported, with inadequate supporting evidence, to an Australian academic Prof Desmond Ball that Nay Pyi Taw had developed a ‘knack for nukes’. Also that North Korea was helping Myanmar build a secret nuclear reactor and plutonium extraction plant with a view to producing a nuclear bomb in five years. The attendant fears were exacerbated by a story making the rounds that six years ago Myanmar had concluded a massive deal with the Ukraine involving the purchase of 1,000 armoured personnel carriers.

The Myanmar government’s less-than-satisfactory response to the devastating Cyclone Nargis in May 2008 led to calls for invoking external intervention in the name of the newly-formulated (and, often dubiously interpreted) United Nations’ principle of ‘the responsibility to protect’ (as was done later to remove Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi) by the then French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner. The European Union and the United States slapped sanctions upon Myanmar, ignoring the reality that the people rather than the targeted government would be consequently hurt. The response to the generals’ announcement of the ‘seven-step road-map to democracy’ – by the Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer – was that reforms in Myanmar were akin to glue running uphill. West of Suez the idea spread that the only conceivable way to treat Myanmar, or ‘Burma’ a name by which westerners and dissidents insisted on calling it, was as a pariah.

Myanmar’s Asian neighbours urged calm. By and large their view was that engagement was the better option to effect the desired changes. India was unmoved by United States’ exhortations to ‘play a more responsible role’ (in other words act in accordance with Western wishes). Bangladesh, itself affected by the Rohingya refugee issue, continued to quietly interact with Myanmar to address their bilateral problems. So did Thailand. China resolutely opposed any UN sanctions, unequivocally stating that any move by the Security Council should be ‘prudent and responsible’ (implying that sanctions were not), and conducive to the mediation efforts of the UN Secretary General. While the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was a ‘house divided’, most of the members preferred to engage rather than ignore their peer, hoping that change would come about as a result of internal pressures, and the force-feeding of democracy could have undesirable consequences (the memories of Iraq, and the experience of Afghanistan being fresh in Asian minds).

This author had argued elsewhere that “the answer to curing the malaise in Myanmar lies, not so much in force as in peer pressure and persuasion”. While it will be an exaggeration to say that genuine change has come to Myanmar, there have been occurrences heralding such change. Perhaps it was as a result of both the carrot and the stick, though it would be difficult to measure how much was owed to which. Though there was no Runnymede moment (in

1215 King John of England sealed the Magna Carta in the meadow by this name, marking the beginning of English democracy), there were cascading events causing rapid and positive changes. It began with the election of a Parliament in 2010, far from perfect as NLD did not contest and a quarter of the membership was reserved for uniformed officials. Then Than Shwe made way for a President, Thein Sein, still an ex-general, but now in retirement mufti. Suddenly a sense of sweeping reforms pervaded the system. Suu Kyi and a large number of political prisoners were released, cease-fires were signed with most ethnic rebels, press censorship was largely lifted, and the NLD was allowed to take part in by-elections in April this year (it secured 43 of the 44 seats contested, including that of Suu Kyi).

The recent resignation of the hard-line Vice-President General Tin Aung Myint Oo, reputed to have been close to the former strongman Than Shwe, has brought grist to the reformists' mill. This was followed by an e-mail interview with Bloomberg by Ko Ko Hlaing, an adviser to the President, asserting that the "military is obedient, educated, and there would be no more coups". Touchwood! The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and the British Prime Minister David Cameron visited Myanmar, Suu Kyi took her seat in the Parliament, and all seemed right with the world!

But only for now! The Rohingya refugee problem and the fighting with the Kachins continue to fester. There is a lot of unfinished business in Myanmar. The next elections are due in 2015. The West would expect that there is greater movement towards democracy by that time, and Aung San Suu Kyi is in a position to lead the government. This would, however, be a triumph of hope over experience. The military is unlikely to goose-step away from power in its entirety so swiftly. So the West will have to do with what they perceive as the best of a bad bargain. Myanmar, a poor country, is rich in resources. These include gems and precious stones, and 90 per cent of the world's rubies come from that country. It once produced 75 per cent of the world's teak wood. It also provides over 50 million tons to global rice supply. On the negative side it produces over eight per cent of all opium. Lured by such statistics, understandably, Western firms are raring to go. The European Union has eased most of its sanctions for a year, but the US, where the process is more complicated, not yet, but is under domestic pressure to do so soon.

Enter India and China. Both have provided military aid in the past (suspended by India since 2008 over human rights issues), and China, the much needed support in the UN Security Council. On 15 June 2009 China announced the construction of a 1,100-km crude oil pipeline from the port of Kyakryu in Myanmar to Kunming in China. It addresses China's 'Malacca Dilemma', which is that the other option of procurement would be through the Malacca Straits, which would call for Chinese naval protection and, in turn, would provoke blue-water projection there by other regional states, including India. In pursuance of its 'Look East' policy India has been seeking engagement with Myanmar in areas such as remote sensing, energy exploration, information technology, hydro-power, and in constructing roads and bridges. Myanmar's infrastructure is awful. Yet it is the conduit that links India to Southeast Asia. Thus the sector cries out for investment. Oddly, despite the closeness, relations with China have at times shown strains, particularly on ethnic conflicts. With India, it has largely

been strain-free. India also is the country Suu Kyi has spent time in and therefore is beholden to. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's prospective visit, therefore, does not come too soon.

What we see is a new Myanmar emerging on South Asia's eastern borders. It is one in which the changes are also spawning their own challenges. For instance, Nay Pyi Taw's policy of 'managed float' for the country's currency, kyat, and any hasty opening-up of its economy could be potentially damaging to Myanmar's nascent industries. Professor Ralph Pettman of the Melbourne University, writing three decades ago, had delineated a traditional behaviour-pattern for Myanmar. He had said: 'It adapts and adjusts, but does not *kowtow* to its neighbour(s).' Both India and China (and perhaps other big powers as well) would do well to heed this extrapolation from history. Thant Myint-U, a grandson of the former Burmese UN Secretary General U Thant and an analyst, has stated: "In Burma, where China meets India, a unique meeting place of cultures and peoples is created ... Progress in Burma would be a boon for the region. A peaceful, prosperous and democratic Burma would be a game changer for Asia". The author would like to add, with a touch of constructive optimism: '... and perhaps for much of the world'.

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