

An Assessment of Manmohan Singh's Visit to Myanmar

Udai Bhanu Singh

Dr Udai Bhanu Singh is Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi

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Summary

A 'scramble for Myanmar' has begun in recent times. With the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signalling a change in policy, Myanmar has seen a steady stream of visits by heads of State or government, foreign ministers, and the like. India's relations with Myanmar have waxed and waned as policy-makers steered their way between high idealism and pragmatic realism. India's policy towards Myanmar has, however, stabilised over time and its preference for pragmatism has spanned governments led by parties of different hues. This was a consequence of a belated realisation, especially since 1993, that the pursuit of India's strategic and economic interests could not await the prolonged political evolution of this important neighbour. As the political processes in Myanmar gathers momentum due to a host of domestic and international factors, it is time yet again to introspect on India's policy towards its eastern neighbour. Whereas India's policy of engagement was earlier at variance with the Western policy of disengagement and sanctions, a convergence seems to be occurring now. India's policy perforce will need recalibration to the degree that Myanmar transforms or holds the promise of transforming.

A 'scramble for Myanmar' has begun in recent times in the wake of domestic political change starting with the promulgation of the 2008 Constitution, elections in November 2010, a new Parliament, and bye-elections in April 2012. With the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signalling a change in policy, Myanmar has seen a steady stream of visits by heads of State or government, foreign ministers, and the like.

The mood in Myanmar today is upbeat: the sudden opening up of the country has raised expectations which the political class may have difficulty meeting. Once again, the people of Myanmar are testing the limits of freedom. Large demonstrations to protest against power outages have been held in front of Sule Pagoda in Yangon and in Mandalay.¹ Threatening to spread to other cities, these protests evoked memories of the 1988 movement and the 2007 uprising sparked by the monks. The April 2012 bye-elections showed that the NLD is still popular. The real test is to come in 2015 when general elections are due. From India's standpoint, a durable solution to Myanmar's political transition lies in a reconciliation among its three stakeholders – political parties, ethnic groups, and the military.

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It is in this context that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh undertook a three-day visit to Myanmar on 27 May 2012, the first such visit by an Indian Prime Minister in 25 years.² During the visit, Singh met the new civilian leadership in the new capital, Naypyitaw, and NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in the old capital, Yangon. The Indian PM's first visit in 25 years almost coincided with Aung San Suu Kyi's first visit outside the country in 24 years. However, the Nobel laureate postponed her Bangkok visit to meet the Indian Prime Minister.

¹ "Myanmar protests an opportunity to show reform", available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/25/us-myanmar-protest-idUSBRE84O08U20120525>, accessed on 27 May 2012.

² The previous prime ministerial visit was by Rajiv Gandhi in 1987.

Agreements Signed during the PM's Visit

India and Myanmar signed 12 MoUs (Memorandums of Understanding) on matters of mutual concern, wherein *development* and *connectivity* were the key watchwords. The understanding is that improved connectivity would lead to greater access between the two countries, while cooperation in fields such as agriculture, trade, education and information technology would address 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 welcome because while MISIS is connected with the ASEAN network of think tanks, it has no such link on an institutionalised basis with the think tanks of India or of the South Asian region.

Stability along the Indo-Myanmar border depends in large measure on economic stability that comes through planned development. For instance, Myanmar has many missing road and rail links and over 70 bridges requiring construction before the connectivity deficit can be overcome. 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.

Table 1: Memorandums of Understanding/Agreements Signed between India and Myanmar

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| 1 | Regarding \$500million Line of Credit |
| 2 | Airline Services Agreement between India and Myanmar: with more carriers and more destinations (extending to other Southeast Asian cities) |
| 3 | India-Myanmar Border Area Development |
| 4 | Establishment of Joint Trade and Investment Forum |
| 5 | Establishment of the Advance Centre for Agriculture Research and Education (ACARE) |

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| 6 | Establishment of Rice Bio Park at the Department of Agricultural Research in Naypyitaw |
| 7 | Setting up Myanmar Institute of Information Technology |
| 8 | Cooperation between Dagon University and Calcutta University |
| 9 | Cooperation between Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies and Indian Council of World Affairs |
| 10 | Agreement on Cooperation between Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies and Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses |
| 11 | Cultural Exchange Programme (2012-2015) |
| 12 | Establishing of Border <i>Haats</i> across the border between Myanmar and India |

India-Myanmar Relations: A Background

The two decades between India's open support for the pro-democracy forces in the 1988 movement and the recent exchange of bilateral visits at the highest levels have clearly demonstrated New Delhi's desire to pursue its strategic and economic goals in Myanmar. However, it has left unresolved the dilemma of how to pursue its stated goals without compromising its commitment to human rights and democratic principles.

A realisation began to dawn in New Delhi soon after 1988 that India's support for the pro-democracy forces in the August 1988 uprising failed to find favour with the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) regime. It was only in 1991, however, that a decision was taken to discontinue criticism of the Myanmar regime in All India Radio's (AIR) Burmese broadcasts. The visit to Yangon (then Rangoon) by the Indian Foreign Secretary in 1993 started the process of improving relations between the two countries. The Indian Government also made an attempt to curb the anti-SLORC activities of Myanmar students in India. These adjustments in Indo-Myanmar relations occurred in the backdrop of momentous changes on the Indian economic horizon. Liberalisation had been introduced in the early 1990s and the Look East Policy too had its beginnings around the same time. These developments helped in defining India's objectives in Myanmar.

To begin with, Myanmar was seen as an important part 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. 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 viewed as a land-bridge to the rest of South East Asia. A second important factor in India-Myanmar relations is the need to control the activities of insurgent groups in their bordering states. Thirdly, India is located between the "Golden Crescent" in the

west and the “Golden Triangle” in the east and thus is confronted by the arms-drug nexus and faces a “silent emergency”. Myanmar still has the dubious distinction of being the second largest producer of opiates (after Afghanistan) and for having a high HIV rate. Opium poppy cultivation has increased in Myanmar every year since 2006, with cultivation concentrated chiefly in the Shan state in the east. The decline in opium production in 2010 due to a disease in the poppy plant in Afghanistan probably incentivised Myanmar poppy cultivators.³ Further, the traditional opium-based drugs have been replaced by designer drugs like amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) (“speed”, “ice” and “ecstasy”) and Myanmar happens to be a major centre for the manufacture of ATS, notably of metamphetamine.⁴ Given all this, India and Myanmar need to take steps keeping in mind a holistic view of security. Fourthly, 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, flowing from all the above factors is the need to ensure the development of India’s North Eastern states.

India-Myanmar Interactions at the Bilateral and Multilateral Levels

The dynamics of Myanmar is such that interlocutors are forced to make adjustments to the evolving situation in that country, which itself is in a perpetually evolving/transitioning mode. Be that as it may, it is important that India not lose the momentum it has imparted to this relationship lest it surrenders whatever gains that have been made so far.

At the bilateral level, right through the phase of transition, the flow of official visits between India and Myanmar did not cease, although at the Prime Ministerial level India could be labelled a laggard. In July 2010, SPDC Chief Than Shwe came to New Delhi. When President Thein Sein representing the new “civilian” government visited in October 2011, two important documents were signed: first, an MoU on the upgradation of Yangon Children’s Hospital and Sittwe General Hospital; and second, a programme for Cooperation in Science and Technology for the period 2012–15. India also extended a \$500 million line of credit to Myanmar. In December 2011, the Speaker of Myanmar’s Lower House of Parliament, Thura Shwe Mann, led a high level parliamentary delegation to India to learn about the functioning of Indian democracy. Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin visited India in January 2012. Besides meeting the PM and the External Affairs Minister, he also gave a lecture at a think tank in the capital. Meanwhile, military-to-military cooperation continued with the Indian Army Chief visiting Myanmar in January 2012 and assuring a higher intake of Myanmar cadets in the NDA, among other things.

³ *World Drug Report 2011*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), United Nations, New York, 2011.

⁴ *Ibid.*

India and Myanmar have also continued to interact at the regional and subregional levels through ASEAN, BIMSTEC, the Mekong Ganga Cooperation forum and SAARC (Myanmar is an Observer since 2008). Myanmar became a BIMSTEC member in December 1997. It took over as the chair of BIMSTEC from India in 2006.⁵

Conclusion

India has quite dexterously handled the ongoing phase of transition in Myanmar based on its conviction that it needs to engage with the regime in power while gradually attempting to bring about a desirable change in the country. Given its deeper understanding of the ground situation as well as a policy that seeks to aid sustainable development and harmonious growth, India is likely to continue to enjoy a special position in Myanmar. Much goodwill will be generated if India were to work towards addressing the real needs of the people of Myanmar. This, in particular, implies strengthening the health and education sectors in that country's border areas. There are many things that should work in India's favour including geographical proximity, common colonial legacy, common cultural bonds, India's democratic credentials and membership of common organisations/forums, which can be used by both countries to transform their experience of the past into a common strength.

⁵ Myanmar heads two of the Sectoral Committees in BIMSTEC – Energy and Agriculture – while India heads three – Transport & Communication, Environment & Disaster Management, and Counter Terrorism & Transnational Crime.