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‘Something of a Homecoming’: Aung San Suu Kyi’s Visit to India

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Background

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar’s iconic pro-democracy leader, visited India for six days, from 13th to 18th November 2012, at the invitation of Sonia Gandhi, the Congress Party’s chairperson, to deliver the Jawaharlal Nehru memorial lecture in Delhi. As part of her trip, she also held personal meetings with India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and other Indian leaders. Part of her itinerary also included a visit to the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore as well as Andhra Pradesh to view the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. This is Suu Kyi’s first visit to India since 1987.

Suu Kyi’s association with India stretches back several decades. Her father, General Aung San, Burma’s most prominent independence leader, was widely viewed as having a very close relationship with Jawaharlal Nehru while her mother, Khin Kyi, was appointed Burma’s ambassador to India in 1960 during which time Aung San Suu Kyi lived in India, graduating from the prestigious Lady Shri Ram College in Delhi. She has, at various points of her public life, affirmed the influence of these years spent in India on how she fashioned the core political attitudes of her later adult life. From 1989 to 1992, the Indian government extended

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its full support to Suu Kyi in her challenge to the military regime in Myanmar for greater democracy. This however changed around 1992 when the Indian government reviewed its policy towards Myanmar due to the perception that its support for the pro-democracy movement was costing India significantly vis-à-vis China's growing engagement with the ruling military regime in Myanmar. In addition, the Indian state also perceived the imperative for closer relations with the ruling regime in Myanmar in dealing with an insurgency on its northeast frontier, which borders Myanmar.

Engaging Suu Kyi and a 'New' Myanmar

Suu Kyi's release from house arrest in 2010, the third phase in an overall period of her detention that lasted 15 of the last 21 years, was greeted with cautious optimism globally. As part of the military regime's attempts at apparent political reform, in 2012 her party won handsomely in Myanmar's by-election and joined the country's parliament despite it still being an institution overwhelmingly controlled by the military-backed ruling party. Since then, Suu Kyi has been warmly courted by several governments, with Thailand, the United States and several European countries being notable examples.

This particular visit was India's attempt to re-engage with Suu Kyi. As Myanmar goes through a major transition domestically, the Indian government is acutely aware that Suu Kyi and her party may likely play an increasingly important role in her country. Having gone to significant lengths to build a durable relationship with Myanmar's military regime, it now perceives the necessity of balancing this relationship by engaging Suu Kyi in order to further Indian interests in a Myanmar whose political future looks decidedly unclear at the moment.

On balance, Suu Kyi's trip did not provide any major clues for the future complexion of India-Myanmar relations. Suu Kyi did make clear that she felt 'saddened' by the Indian government's decision to cease their earlier support for the pro-democracy movement 'in its most difficult days' and by its related engagement with the ruling military junta in Myanmar. However, in an apparent attempt to balance the tenor of her public statements in India, she claimed she felt 'partly a citizen of India' and that she had great faith in the lasting friendship between the peoples of India and Myanmar. In a clear reference to the uncertain nature of Myanmar's current political transition, she asked for India's help in realising Myanmar's democratic hopes, noting that Myanmar had 'not yet achieved the goal of democracy'. In addition, while understanding the lure of natural resources offered by Myanmar as well as the need for it to attract investments into the country, Suu Kyi advised her Indian audience that 'responsible investment was needed', especially in areas inhabited by Myanmar's religious and ethnic minorities. This could signal one of her party's future priorities in balancing the imperatives of development and empowering Myanmar's various minorities in an increasingly democratic Myanmar in the near future. For India, this might mean engaging with a wider range of political stakeholders beyond the ruling party if it wants to increase its stake in Myanmar's resource development.

Wider Implications: US, China and Myanmar

One clear objective of India's policy towards Myanmar since the early 1990s, as stated before, has been to limit Myanmar's diplomatic dependence on China. Facing a stringent set of international sanctions over a sustained period of time, Myanmar's ruling regime had only a few diplomatic options. It only became a member of ASEAN in 1997 and despite its membership, Myanmar has been subject to strident criticism from the European Union and the United States. India's decision to engage the ruling regime in the early 1990's was meant to provide Myanmar with wider diplomatic options besides China. ASEAN's decision to make Myanmar a member (and to designate Myanmar as the chair of ASEAN in 2014) was informed by a similar imperative – to limit the possibility of Myanmar becoming a satellite state of China in much the same way North Korea has been for some time. Despite such aims on the part of India (and ASEAN), China's influence and presence in Myanmar has been steadily growing.

There has been much debate about the reasons surrounding the military regime's decision to cautiously allow greater democratisation within Myanmar. Some see the punishing schedule of international economic sanctions as having finally borne fruit while another school of thought views ASEAN's policy of 'constructive engagement' as the decisive factor. A third, and compelling view, locates Myanmar's impetus for political transformation in the context of Myanmar's ruling regime's increasing unease over its over-dependence on China. Political change in this instance was meant to facilitate a wider range of diplomatic options globally, thus helping to ensure that Myanmar's autonomy in global affairs was not curbed by an over-dependence on China.

While it is difficult to ascertain with certainty the one single reason for Myanmar's seeming political transition, from India's perspective, the ramifications of recent developments in Myanmar are largely positive. One major consequence of Myanmar's apparent political transition is the cautious, but unambiguous thawing of relations between the US and Myanmar. The earlier visit of Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and the very recent visit of President Obama to Myanmar signals the US's determination to seize this historical opportunity to prise Myanmar away from China's growing diplomatic orbit. In the context of President Obama's declared 'pivot' towards Asia, drawing Myanmar out of its dependent relationship with China has become an important foreign policy goal. For India, this is a very positive development. As much as India has tried to engage the military regime since the 1990's to limit Chinese influence, both diplomatic and economic, it appreciates that it has not made enough headway mainly because it does not seem to have the resources at its disposal to pose a credible challenge to China in the case of Myanmar. The US will present a much more formidable challenge to growing Chinese influence in Myanmar and has the potential to push Myanmar to play a more even-handed role in Asian affairs, especially in relation to the competitive aspects of the India-China relationship in the near future. This however hinges crucially on the evolving complexion of Myanmar's transition and the extent to which Suu

Kyi and her party are allowed to play an increasingly important role in Myanmar's nascent democracy.

Conclusion

Suu Kyi's visit to India was largely seen as an important symbolic event and many in India placed a large amount of significance on the close personal and family links she had with India. The fact that India had largely abandoned its earlier support to her democracy movement did not however go unnoticed. Despite this, Suu Kyi's public pronouncements suggest India remains a potentially important actor for Myanmar's future evolution, in both domestic politics and foreign affairs. Also significant from India's perspective is the slow but steady thawing of relations between Myanmar and the US. Greater US engagement of Myanmar will help limit future Chinese influence over Myanmar. For India, this is a very positive development.

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