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Bangladesh - Myanmar Relations: The Security Dimension

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Nature of the Relationship

Relations and interactions of states, big and small, assume three forms: conflictual; collaborative; and competitive. It is observed that Bangladesh-Myanmar relations have developed through phases of cooperation and conflict. Conflict in this case is not meant in the sense of confrontation, but only in the sense of conflict of interests and resultant diplomatic face-off. Bangladesh-Myanmar relations officially began from 13 January 1972, the date on which Myanmar, as the sixth state, accorded recognition to Bangladesh as a sovereign nation. But over the years the scenario has undergone an unwelcome change and the relations between these two neighbours have at times not been as friendly as expected due to the presence of some unresolved issues like Rohingya refugees and maritime boundary demarcation.

Strategic Significance of the Relationship

Myanmar is the only other neighbour that we have on our border besides India. It can provide certain strategic advantages to Bangladesh. It is the potential gateway for an alternative land route opening towards China and South-East Asia other than the sea. Such road link has the potentiality for a greater communication network between Bangladesh and South-East Asian countries including Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. Moreover, with a rich natural resource base, Myanmar is a country with considerable potential. Myanmar's forests and other natural resources like gas, oil, stones are enormous from which Bangladesh can be benefitted greatly. For this reason, it is more in Bangladesh's interest to maintain good relations with Myanmar for reasons of national security. Unfriendly relations with Myanmar can benefit small insurgent groups living in the hilly jungle areas of the southern portion of the Chittagong Hill Tracts which can cause some degree of instability in the area and become a serious concern for national security.

Tensions and Confrontations

However, the relations between these two countries experienced a bitter taste when in 1991 Myanmar attacked and ransacked bordering Rejupara border out post (BOP). Myanmar forces killed three members of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and looted all the arms and ammunition. Consequently, Bangladesh was put on a high military alert and both the countries reached in a boiling point, nothing

short of war hysteria. War clouds were visible everywhere. However, a major regional clash was somehow averted by the then newly elected Bangladesh government. Since then, the relationship has never been smooth. There are several complicating factors which obstruct the normal relationship between these two neighbouring countries. Among them, the issue of the Rohingya refugees is a very crucial one. Indeed, Myanmar has a poor human rights record for suppressing and depriving its minority communities of basic rights and privileges and as a result of this, thousands of Muslim Rohingya refugees crossed into Bangladesh territory to escape the atrocities committed by the military junta. Bangladesh with the help of international community has tried to resolve this issue through diplomatic channel but due to Myanmar military junta's stubbornness, the refugee problem could not be resolved and this is creating security, economic and social problems in the country. Unresolved maritime boundary is another issue which obstructs the relationship now and then. Both the governments are in disagreement and there has been stand-off in the past as both sides lay claim to maritime areas which are reported to have enormous gas and oil resources. The most recent stand-off took place in November, 2008, when four Korean ships guarded by Myanmar's navy started exploration for oil and gas reserves within 50 nautical miles South-west of St. Martin Island, in Bangladesh water. Though Myanmar withdrew their activities later in the face of strong protest from Bangladesh but they made it very clear that they would come back in the same area in future.

Comparative Defence Capabilities

Myanmar is relatively robust in terms of military capabilities. They have approximately 500,000 personnel in the armed forces, equipped with modern weapons. They also have improved logistic backup to carry out sustained military operation. The country has built strong relations with China which has a very crucial strategic implication. Myanmar has received huge supplies of arms and other military hardware from China since the signing of two different defence collaboration agreements in 1990 and 1994. It has been reported in the media that by 2007, China had supplied US\$ 2.2 to 2.5 billion worth of weapons and other military hardware to Myanmar which includes artillery pieces, tanks, Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC), trucks, high speed jet fighters, naval vessels etc. Besides, Myanmar has improved its relations with North Korea recently. It has also been reported that in November, 2008, the head of state of Myanmar and Commander-in-Chief of the Myanmar Armed Forces went to Pyongyang to purchase the technology for building tunnels, aircraft, naval ships and missiles ranging 500-1,000 kilometres. There is also an allegation that North Korea is helping Myanmar to build a secret nuclear reactor and plutonium extraction plant that will enable the production of an atomic bomb within five years. The nuclear complex is supposed to be hidden inside a mountain at Naung Laing in the country's north. Besides, having external assistance, Myanmar has a very robust indigenous military-industrial base. They have 13 major military industries which produce approximately 70 items of military equipment. On the other hand, compared to Myanmar's military hardware, Bangladesh is lagging far behind. The Bangladesh military has an approximate strength of 150,000 personnel. The navy is in need to significant modernisation; two of its four frigates being over 50 years old. The border is almost unguarded due to the collapse of the BDR structure and the recent pullout of army from the Chittagong Hill Tracts area. The lack of intelligence gathering capacity is obvious. Besides, the level of armaments is not satisfactory too.

Recent Developments

Recently Myanmar has started to strengthen its military presence in the Rakhine state, which borders Bangladesh. The major activities along the border area by Myanmar Army have been significant and can be enumerated under the following broad parameters:

- Movement of Myanmar troops and massive patrolling along the bordering area.
- Construction of concrete pillars and barbed wire fencing along the border.
- Strengthening Nasaka camps by Army troops near border areas.
- Runway at Sitwee is extended enabling it for operation of Mig-29 multi-role combat aircraft. All the 12 Mig 29 aircrafts of Myanmar Air Force are presently deployed in Sitwee Airport. Land is acquired for construction of airport at Buthidaung, near Headquarters MOC-15.
- Several high profile visits have taken place in the Rakhine state.
- Regular disembarkation of tanks, artillery guns, Recoilless Rifles, mortars in Buthidaung river jetty is going on.
- Continuation of forced labour and Rohingya intimidation.
- Massive repair and reconstruction of road, bridges and culverts are going on in Western Command area.
- Conducting extensive patrolling along bordering areas of Bangladesh by Myanmar Army
- Acquiring Defender class Maritime Patrol Aircraft on lease from India.
- Myanmar commenced barbed wire fencing along Bangladesh - Myanmar border since March 2009. So far approximately 38 km fencing is completed till end of July 2009 (approx 40% of total wk).
- Myanmar is forming 'People's Militia Force' by the members of the Rakhaine state's Marma community.

Concluding Observations

Bangladesh needs to take Myanmar's recent military ambition seriously. The country's relationship with its eastern neighbor remains unstable and the latest developments are particularly alarming. Our policy makers should remember the axiom that diplomacy is a helpless orphan unless backed by force. For this reason, existing defence priorities must be reviewed to suit the magnitude of threat being faced by the nation. The policy regarding Myanmar needs to be a careful combination of effective diplomacy while safeguarding our security interests. Our policy makers have never considered Myanmar as a close neighbour. Rather, they have considered Myanmar as a distant neighbour of Bangladesh. Bangladesh needs to transform this distant neighbor in perception into a close neighbor in reality. Finally, based on all the realities, Bangladesh has to make up its mind sooner rather than later how it wishes to pursue its geopolitical goals to ensure optimum gains for the sake of national security. There is no time to think. It's time to act as the country is far behind in the race.

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