

# Understanding the India-Myanmar Relations

On October 2, 2020, India and Myanmar participated in the 19th round of Foreign Office Consultations. This took place virtually, and new means of cooperation were discovered with India being represented by Foreign Secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla and Myanmar being represented by Permanent Secretary, U Soe Han.

During the consultations, both sides reviewed the entire gamut of relations, including border cooperation and up-gradation of border infrastructure, the status of India's ongoing development projects in Myanmar, trade and investment ties, power and energy cooperation, consular matters and cultural cooperation, including the ongoing restoration work on earthquake-damaged pagodas in Bagan. But most importantly, India stated its agreement to provide debt relief service to Myanmar under the G-20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative ("**DSSI**"), which shall assist Myanmar in its efforts to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. Under DSSI, the severe impact of COVID-19 pandemic is being managed with the encouragement of the WBG, IMF and consequently, G20 economies are allowing the world's poorest countries to suspend repayment of official bilateral credit. In October itself, India handed over 3000 vials of Remdesivir to Myanmar to fight Covid-19. There is even an exchange of assurance regarding the joint development of the vaccine between the two States.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has shaken up the entire world, and in these troubling times, assistance from neighbouring nations is crucial. The developing nations will have to come together to support each other and ensure the safety of its citizens. Myanmar and India share a relation of tremendous support, and such exchange of assistance will strengthen the bilateral relations as well as provide the key to not be completely dependent on the western nations in times of crisis.

## **The Sittwe Port Project**

Infrastructure is indeed very significant for every country, and apart from technical assistance, often financial assistance is needed to complete such projects due to the high amount of capital involved. Several infrastructure projects in Myanmar like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the Trilateral Highway have attained assistance from India. A press release recently reported that India and Myanmar have also agreed to work towards the operationalization of the Sittwe port in the Rakhine state in the first quarter of 2021.

Sittwe port is part of the Kaladan multi-modal transit transport project, which is crucial to India's plans for the landlocked northeastern states to access the Bay of Bengal through Mizoram and to provide alternative connectivity to Kolkata without having to use the circuitous Siliguri corridor. Once the port is operationalized through a private operator, Indian goods can be taken via the Aizawl-Zorinpui-Palletwa axis to Kaladan river, and then transferred to Sittwe port. This move is beneficial not only for India and Myanmar but also for other southeastern nations. Such a project is beneficial for enhanced connectivity and economic participation amongst various nations in a convenient manner.

Consequently, a Special Economic Zone near the Rakhine State would depict a long-standing economic relation between the two. The northeastern states of India will also receive a boost through this project. The easy access to the Bay of Bengal will open up new opportunities for trade and investment, especially for northeastern nations, which has the capacity to subsequently benefit the whole country. The trade between Myanmar and India is also bound to rise with this project. The Act East policy of India will receive a colossal incentive on completion of the project.

### **India's proactive approach towards gaining a regional outreach and building ties with Myanmar**

India shares borders with nine nations which include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The tensions and conflicts between Pakistan and India are indeed quite popular in the entire world. The deep cultural, as well as historical link between Pakistan and Afghanistan, is well known. Additionally, even when diplomatic ties between India and China are still "looking" strong, the pandemic has brought in new dimensions to the relations between the two. Therefore, amongst the nine neighbouring nations, only six nations remain with a potential of healthy and strong bilateral relations.

Myanmar, being one of these six, the "shared historical, ethnic, cultural and religious ties" between India and Myanmar, is significant in the development of foreign relations of India. Myanmar shares close borders with the Northeast Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland with a shared border of 1,643 kilometres and the land-locked nature of these states becomes a myth when we look at their connectivity through Myanmar to the Bay of Bengal. Additionally, Myanmar is a key pillar of India's Act East and Neighborhood First Policy. India's 'Act East' policy is a diplomatic initiative to promote economic, strategic and cultural relations with the vast Asia-Pacific region at different levels. Certainly for India's Act East Policy to be successful, the betterment of connectivity with Myanmar and Thailand is vital. Being the only country that sits at the intersection of India's "Neighborhood First" policy and its "Act East" policy, Myanmar is an essential element in India's practice of regional diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific and serves as a land bridge to connect South Asia and Southeast Asia.

Myanmar is also India's closest defence partner in the region. Seeing that Myanmar is critical to its national security interests, India provides military training and conducts joint military exercises with the Myanmar Army like the India-Myanmar Bilateral Military Exercise (IMBAX-2017 and IMBEX 2018-19), by which India had trained the Myanmar Army to be able to participate in UN Peacekeeping Operations. Delhi has also agreed to train Myanmar army officers and allow them to study at military academies in India. Currently, with an energy portfolio of more than \$ 1.2 billion, Myanmar is the largest destination for India's investment in the oil and gas sector in Southeast Asia.

Therefore, in terms of the energy sector, defence sector, the Act East Policy and the development of the northeastern nations, the relations with Myanmar will turn out to be very important in the coming future. Being an important country amongst the Bay of Bengal countries, Myanmar plays a strategic role in the upliftment of the economy of India. Myanmar and India even share a 725-km maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal.

Other agreements such as Project Agreement for the establishment of modern Integrated Check Post at Tamu, MoU for the construction of 50 basic schools and the Project Agreement for the upgrading of agricultural mechanization sub-station will also be signed shortly. The development in Rakhine State, the sharing of library material and other factors have a prime influence on the bilateral relations. The humanitarian assistance and the grants provided by India have always been a leading example for many other nations. In February 2020, the prime minister and President Myint later held talks at Hyderabad House and ten agreements were signed between the two countries, the focus being on development projects under India's assistance, particularly in the conflict-torn Rakhine state. The facts stated above reflect the complete dynamic approach adopted by India to establish strong strategic relations. It is undoubtedly true that both nations have the potential to flourish and can achieve significant heights if given the right incentive. With each other's support, both the nations may even give a competitive edge to the neighbouring nations.

In fact, the proactive approach of India is indispensable in the prevailing circumstances so as to avoid the negative influence of China on Myanmar. Such influence could even conclude with Myanmar becoming a debt-driven nation in the clutches and control of China, completely. The balance of power in the Southeastern nations may even receive a drop once China acquires the control of Myanmar. This may cause a major security concern for India. But with a total bilateral trade of \$2 billion, India's economic engagement with Myanmar lags behind China, behoving Modi's government to scale up India-Myanmar economic ties. Therefore, the proactive approach being initiated by India becomes a key factor to influence the regional relations.

If a reactive approach is adopted by India, it will be in a ditch with too many problems all occurring at once. The consequences will cost more if prevention is not done currently. It is a known fact that a spark neglected burns the house. Since India can predict the circumstances in the future as an outcome of these bilateral relations with reasonable certainty, a proactive approach becomes suitable. The benefits accruing to both the participants is desirable and may even achieve a higher standard, even if one of the participants plays a leading role.

### **The dominant powers in ties with Myanmar**

There are several dominant powers that are building ties with Myanmar, namely India, China, USA, and other Western nations. Beijing is using COVID diplomacy to push its BRI initiative in neighbouring Myanmar via CMEC. China has also influenced economic development and political stability in Myanmar. In January 2020, "Paukphaw", which literally means born together, implying not only a shared destiny but racial kinship, was reinforced through strong political and economic bonds between Myanmar and China. It was even reported recently, in September 2020, that China seeks to set up military logistic facilities in Myanmar. This is a measure to maintain military control in the region. The Auditor General of Myanmar also cautioned the government officials of Myanmar about the dependence on debt being given through Chinese loans. The "client state" formula or the "satellite state" formula of China has already affected Sri Lanka, and Myanmar must take into consideration the impact of the controlling influence of China, no matter how generous China behaves.

The influence of China on Myanmar dates back to decades of history. However, the rising influence on China on Myanmar was noticed by the US when Barack Obama came to power in 2009 and launched “Pivot to Asia” to emphasize that the US had strategic interests in Asia. Myanmar also launched political and economic reform in 2008 and adopted a “Look West” policy by re-establishing its linkages with the US. Even recently, in August 2020, US new Ambassadorial nominee to Myanmar Thomas Laszlo Vajda has emphasized that one of his goals as envoy would be “to advance US interests and values” in the Southeast Asian country and help defend the country against “malign influences” in a veiled reference to China. This shows how the US has also been observing Myanmar as a potential ally and wishes to enhance its position over Myanmar.

The dominance of Myanmar of neighbouring nations like China and India along with powerful western nations like the US has constantly been rising. In furtherance of promoting its domestic interests, Myanmar has accepted every proposal which may benefit the nation currently, keeping aside the intent behind these proposals.

### **Balance of Powers and Competing Interests for India**

With Myanmar receiving aid and assistance from different time zones and diverse regions, a crucial question which arises is, how has Myanmar been balancing these powers? China and India not being in a “perfect” relation currently, Myanmar is technically attaining immense assistance from both these competing nations. Still, Myanmar has been effectively managing a diplomatic tie with both the nations. Similarly, Myanmar shows no stick-to-the-neighbour formula when dealing with the US. The balance of powers by Myanmar is commendable; however, very vulnerable as well. China and the US are at a constant pseudo-Cold War and with so many competing nations looking for Myanmar as a trophy prize, one day or another, Myanmar will have to choose. Although none of these nations would be quite happy with the second prize.

With so many competing interests, it may be probable that a country starts to wonder, is it even worth it? India, as a nation, has achieved remarkable heights recently and is still very encouraged to grow. There have been instances when Myanmar has shown a disinterest towards China. One can say that quick glances of the control of China keep occurring at Myanmar and at these junctures, Myanmar has broken several contracts and reacted boldly. By challenging China’s monopoly, the Myanmar government is opening strategic space to create further competition between India and the United States on the one hand and China on the other, affording the Myanmar government a more comfortable degree of leverage and autonomy in the international arena.

There is a high potential for India in Myanmar in various diverse sectors like agriculture, infrastructure and defence. With China trying to push Myanmar into a debt trap, it is the right time for India to stick with Myanmar when Myanmar realizes the intent behind practices of China.

One can foresee Myanmar’s bias towards India in the coming future. Myanmar has even decided to expedite India-backed infrastructure projects and widen security ties with India as it seeks to balance China’s expanding presence in the country in the backdrop of Beijing’s active cross-border support for rebel groups and push for early completion of BRI projects. By challenging the BRI project, Myanmar shows

how India is a priority over China. The potential of India and Myanmar in exploring complementary linkages in pharmaceuticals, agriculture, information technology and telecommunication infrastructure, traditional and renewable energy, among others, can present a compelling case for commodity-linked, export-oriented investment.

### **Conclusion**

Myanmar is a nation with latent qualities and abilities. Although several powers have been influencing the decisions of Myanmar, the actions of Myanmar must portray what is best for its domestic self. The interest of the nations itself must never be subsidized. India has a lot to gain from Myanmar and a lot to give to Myanmar as well. This give and take relationship has been the foundation of the bilateral ties between the two nations. However, the ties are in a vulnerable stage currently, but the proactive approach of India can mitigate all doubts and ensure that the struggle to support shall be worth the effort that India is putting in.

The ties will benefit the neighbouring nations with security and infrastructure and give the Southeastern Asian region a balance of resources as well as power. India is at a stage where it will regret if it backs out now and will have to take the risk of a proactive approach to assure support to Myanmar.