

Global India Foundation International Conference

India-Myanmar Relations: Strengthening Ties and Deepening Engagements

India International Centre, Annexe

Max Mueller Marg, New Delhi

15th February, 2012.

Concept Note

India's relations with Myanmar, erstwhile Burma, have waxed and waned since the establishment of their diplomatic ties in 1948 under the political leadership of Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru and U Nu. Geographically contiguity in terms of a shared boundary of sixteen hundred kilometres and a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal, positions them as immediate neighbours with significant geo-strategic advantages. The historical, cultural, ethnic and religious ties shared by them prompted a Treaty of Friendship in 1951. However, the military take-over in Burma in 1962 presented a difficult political choice for the committed Indian democracy and relations subsequently stagnated. During Indira Gandhi's rule, India avoided any contact with Burma and was critical of its suppression of democratic movement and violation of human rights. Rajiv Gandhi also preferred to extend moral support to the then on-going pro-democracy movement in Burma. His government provided thousands of Burmese citizens with "refugee status" in India after they fled Myanmar in wake of military repression.

The politico-economic compulsions of the 1990s opened new vistas in India's foreign policy and an active engagement of Myanmar seemed prudent. The country not only proved crucial for furthering India's economic interests, but also vital to the security and development of the north-eastern states of India, penetrating the Southeast Asian region under the rubric of the 'Look East Policy' and challenging growing Chinese influence in Asia as a whole. India's then Foreign Secretary J.N Dixit visited Yangon in March 1993 and issue pertaining to border trade and drug trafficking were addressed by the two sides. At this juncture, owing to the differences in political systems, the two countries assured each other of mutual non-interference in domestic affairs.

From 1995-1998, various irritants re-surfaced in India-Myanmar relations and India seemed once again inclined to prioritize the success of the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar. New Delhi conferred Jawaharlal Nehru Award on Aung San Suu Kyi for promoting international understanding, thus provoking protests by Myanmar's military junta. The National Democratic Alliance government in India infused fresh diplomatic vigour in relations in 1998 and issues of common interest were explored through the avenues of strategic cooperation on internal security, border management and modalities to enhance border trade. Several agreements were signed and Indian dignitaries paid regular visits to Myanmar. In January 2003, Myanmar's foreign minister Win Aung visited India; a visit by a senior leader after more than fifteen years. The two countries signed a protocol to establish regular bilateral ministerial consultations and agreed on new areas of cooperation such as infrastructure, energy and information technology.

As Myanmar's head of state visited India in 2004 after twenty four years, the remit of cooperation was further broadened to include industry, energy, rail transportation, communications, science and technology and health, setting up cultural exchanges and cooperation in non-traditional security issues. India also raised the issue of insurgency in its northeast region with bases in Myanmar and the military ruler assured to take necessary steps to oust the rebels from its soil. India's pressure to curb insurgency bore results in January 2006 when India Myanmar jointly held military operation to flush out the rebels inside Myanmar's territory.

Apart from cultivating bilateral relations directly, India is also engaging Myanmar through ASEAN and BIMSTEC. India's engagement with Myanmar through ASEAN began in 1997, when it was admitted as its full dialogue partner and in the same year Myanmar became its full member. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) set up in 1997 is another forum through which India is engaging Myanmar.

In terms of economic relations, India has become Myanmar's major trading partners and fourth largest market for its goods. Bilateral trade between the two countries has expanded significantly from approximately twelve million US dollars in 1980-81 to US\$ 1207.56 million in 2009-10. In October 2011, India extended US\$ five hundred million credit line to boost strategic, economic and energy ties. The Indian government is currently engaged in various infrastructural and non-infrastructural projects in Myanmar. India has offered thirty

five million as financial assistance to Myanmar for its various development projects. This includes multi-modal transport system, road, railways, power transmission lines, telephone network and oil refinery. The assistance to railway infrastructure is part of the ambitious Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) project that would link New Delhi with Hanoi in Vietnam. In terms of strengthening geo-strategic ties, new initiatives are being undertaken in naval cooperation and resource exploration for meeting energy needs. Myanmar has the world's tenth-biggest gas reserves estimated to be more than ninety trillion cubic feet. India has evinced keen desire to procure gas from Myanmar to meet its energy needs. However, currently India is facing problems of transportation of the gas from Myanmar and avenues to resolve them are being sought.

Crucial internal political developments in Myanmar render unprecedented opportunities to further India-Myanmar political relations in the near future. The possibilities of a democratic transition in Myanmar has been unequivocally supported by India, with Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh promising necessary assistance to ensure an inclusive and broad based political shift. The two countries are deeply conscious of their multi-faceted relationship and seek to complement diplomatic and strategic avenues of cooperation with overall socio-economic development and stability of the region. The coincidence of favourable political environment, rising geo-strategic needs and regional concerns hinging on Chinese camaraderie with Myanmar, convey the urgency to accomplish new headways in India-Myanmar relations. Conscious pursuit and resolution of problematic issues like cross border insurgency, festering narcotics trade, border posts, border fencing and border trade seem imperative, together with continuing the momentum in geo-economic and socio-economic initiatives.

For an exposition and subsequent development of India's policy options for fruitful engagement with Myanmar, it is necessary to prepare an appropriate venue for the dissemination of relevant knowledge. It is extremely important that these issues be debated between opinions that have been formulated as much by practical experience and knowledge as by theoretical perceptions. Global India Foundation is hosting the coming together of India's and Myanmar's viewpoints on this pertinent theme by organizing an international conference on 15th of February, 2012 at the India International Centre, Annexe, New Delhi.