

CHAPTER III

GEO-STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE REGION

3.1 General.

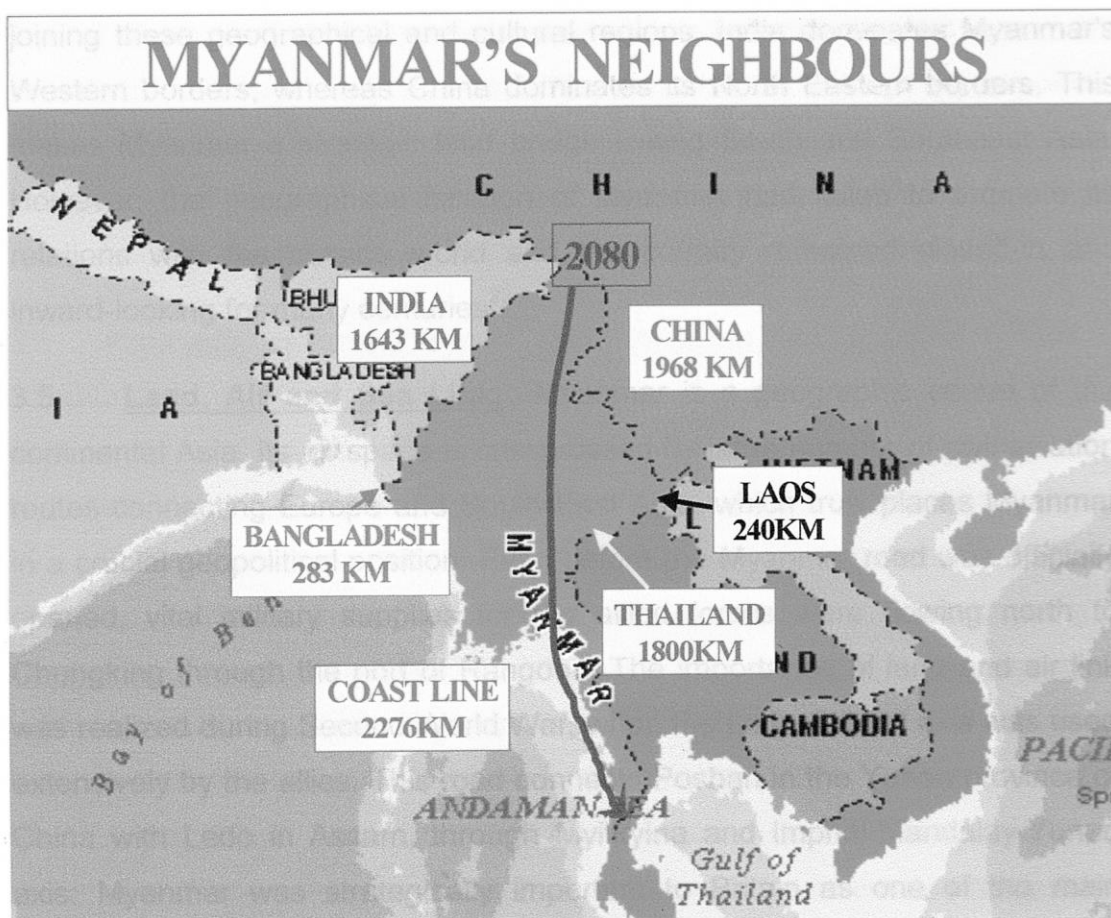
Myanmar has historically been a reclusive State. The geographical location of Myanmar had long failed to promote its relations with the outside world, and the country remained closed-in and inward looking for many centuries. However, now it has garnered international attention due to changed circumstances. The rise of China as a major global economic power and the realization of India's potential to grow as yet another global economic power are redefining international relationships in South and Southeast Asia. Presently, Myanmar is viewed as one of the most critical area of interest to India and China. China has developed close political, economic and military relations with Myanmar. India is also making its best efforts to engage Myanmar. These recent developments have been the result of the realization of the dynamics of the geostrategic location of Myanmar and both the nations wish to exploit the same by the means of positive engagements in political, economic and military front so as to utilize the region to their advantage.

Myanmar lies at a junction of South, Southeast, and East Asia, where the dominant cultures of these three sub regions compete for influence. It lies also across the 'fault lines' between three major civilizations; Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian¹⁹. Its important position is attracting attention from analysts, officials, and military planners. Myanmar's close relationship with China and aggressive engagement policy by China has 'reminded' India of Myanmar's geostrategic importance and also has prompted it to adopt different approach in engaging Myanmar.

3.2 Location. Myanmar has a total area of 676,577 sq km, which makes it the largest country of mainland Southeast Asia. It lies between latitudes 9⁰

¹⁹ Huntington, Samuel, (1996). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

and 29°N and longitudes 92° and 102° E.²⁰ It lies on the intersection of three large geographical masses of China, India and the Indochinese peninsula. It is seemingly protected in the North by the mountain ranges and by Indian Ocean in the South. Myanmar shares common borders with five countries: Bangladesh 283 km, China 1,968 km, India 1,643 km, Laos 240 km, and Thailand 1,800 km. Myanmar's border with Bangladesh to its Northwest is crucial from India's perspective because it provides an alternative route and a crucial route to Myanmar and Southeast Asia. It is important to note that the North Eastern states of India, through which the route to Myanmar traverse, are linked to the rest of India by a very narrow stretch of land called 'Chicken Neck'. An alternative route through Bangladesh to Myanmar and further to ASEAN countries or China can reduce the journey time to the Northeastern states of India.



²⁰ Chandra, Puran. (2013). *Burma: Past and Present: a Fact Book*. Forward Books: New Delhi.

3.3 **Intersection of Cultures.** The natural borders of Myanmar have not hindered the mobility of the people in the region, truly turning it into an intersection of cultures. The Myanmar population, mostly rural (70-75%), is estimated at 54.74 million inhabitants today, which makes it the most populated continental Southeast Asian state after Vietnam. Of this population of Myanmar's nationality, barely two-thirds belong to the purely Burmans (Buddhist) ethnic group. Over 30 percent of Myanmar's population is composed of 135 indigenous minorities,²¹ as the country has never been united around the Burmans alone, since 1948.

3.4 **Myanmar: The 'Indo-Chinese' Node.** Myanmar is one of the major geographical centres of Asia. It is located on the fringes of China, Tibet, India (spreading right up to the Himalayas) and the Indochinese peninsula of South-East Asia. Truly, at the crossroads, Myanmar is therefore the strategic node joining these geographical and cultural regions. India dominates Myanmar's Western borders, whereas China dominates its North Eastern borders. This makes Myanmar a strategic land bridge linking South and Southeast Asia. However, the geographical location of Myanmar had failed to promote its relations with the outside world and the country remained closed-in and inward-looking for many centuries²².

3.5 **Land, Air and Sea Link.** Myanmar is a geographic centre of the continental Asia. Its air space is crisscrossed by large number of civil aviation routes connecting Europe and South East Asia, which truly places Myanmar in a crucial geopolitical position. Even before the Myanmar road was officially opened, vital military supplies for the allied forces were flowing north to Chungking through the port of Rangoon. The importance of land and air link was realized during Second World War, when the Ledo-Stilwell axis was used extensively by the allies. This road connects Poshan in the Yunnan province of China with Ledo in Assam, through Myitkyina and Imphal-Mandalay-Yunnan axis. Myanmar was strategically important to Britain as one of the main

²¹ Peter Carey, "From Burma to Myanmar; Military rule and the Struggle for Democracy", Research Paper, Nov-Dec 1999, Pp.49.

²² Wooing The Generals. India's New Burma Policy. Renaud Egrettau, Authors Press, pp 47.

sources of rice for its Asian dependencies, where food shortages were fuelling anti-colonial sentiment²³.

After Myanmar was granted independence in 1948, its geostrategic position attracted even wider attention. Due to its proximity to China, India, and Vietnam, it was seen as a country on the periphery of the free world. During the 1950s, when Rangoon was threatened by a number of insurgencies including the powerful Communist Party of Myanmar, British Commonwealth countries made considerable efforts to shore up the fledgling government of Prime Minister U Nu. To the members of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), Myanmar was a country of almost as much strategic importance as Vietnam. The US firmly believed that if Myanmar fell to the communist domination, a communist military advance through Thailand might make Indochina and Tonkin indefensible. To the United Kingdom, the loss of Myanmar to the Chinese-sponsored communists would threaten the security of Malaya (then including Singapore) and the strategically important Straits of Malacca. Some Western analysts, who clearly had not experienced the harsh terrain, were concerned about a relatively easy invasion route from Yunnan Province across Northern Myanmar to India's Assam province.

3.6 **Proximity to Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea**. The Bay of Bengal constitutes a maritime area of almost 3.3 million square km in the North-eastern part of the Indian Ocean. It is surrounded by Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India and Myanmar. The Bay is separated from the Andaman Sea by the long string of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands which emerge to the south of Rangoon, at the mouth of the Irrawaddy and Bassein rivers. This archipelago, composed of several hundreds of islands and islets, belongs nearly entirely to India. Just three small island groups near the Myanmar coast, south of city of Bassein fall under Myanmar since a rich merchant from Rangoon bought them during British colonialism; the Coco Islands (Greater Coco and Little Coco) and Preparis Islands. Little Coco is only 25 nautical miles away from

²³ Selth, Andrew (2002). Burma and Superpower Rivalries in the Asia-Pacific". Naval War College Review, Spring. Vol.LV, No 2.

Landsfall Island²⁴, the Northern most in the chain of Andamans Islands.

3.7 **Myanmar's Maritime Geopolitics and Malacca Strait.** Andaman Sea, located West to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, is of strategic importance as it is closer to Southeast Asia than India and is shared by five countries; India, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. Indian Andaman-Nicobar Island chain, with about 750 km length and a sizeable EEZ, is located near the entrance to the Strait of Malacca, with the southernmost point only about 128 km from the northern tip of Sumatra. The long South Eastern stretch of the Myanmar's Mon state and Tenasserim Division acts as an interface between this sea and the Indochina's peninsula. With 2,228 kilometres of coasts, Myanmar could avail of the enormous opportunities offered by the Indian Ocean.²⁵ Although Burmese strategic interests have always been towards hinterland, the Bay of Bengal's main Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) are relatively close to Burmese coast line and the strategic use of Burmese maritime geopolitics could prove profitable to any Burmese Government²⁶. This long coastline, in particular the adjoining areas of the Coco Islands and the Andaman Sea are important to India's strategic consideration. Myanmar's location is also vital to strengthening India's Look East Policy, energy security and counterbalancing Chinese sway in Southeast Asia²⁷.

Myanmar enjoys many secure and tactical harbours such as Sittwe, Ramree, Yangoon, Moulmeen, Tavot, Murgui, and Kawthaung. Most of the tankers take the route South of the Bay of Bengal by passing through the Malacca strait, South of the Nicobar Islands (Indira point) and West of the headland of Myanmar's Tenasserim Division (port of Kawthaung). The importance of northern part of the Indian Ocean has long been ignored, apart from the control of the SLOC. But the stakes involved, especially due to energy route, are much more significant as they could appear, for the Bay of

²⁴ EgretEAU, Renaud. (2003). *Wooring the Generals: India's New Burma Policy*. New Delhi: Authors Press. P 52.

²⁵ *ibid.* p 53-56.

²⁶ *ibid.* p 11.

²⁷ Sinha, Tuli (2009). *China-Myanmar Energy Engagements Challenges And Opportunities For India. IPCS Issue Brief No 134.*

Bengal's geo-strategic environment may create real competition between the regional powers, especially as far as the India- China rivalry is concerned and Myanmar caught between the two.²⁸ Moreover, China is equipping itself with more naval vessels. As per US Navy, China has more submarines than US and is expanding its area of operation to Indian Ocean, besides increasing the length of deployment of submarines.²⁹

3.8 Importance for India's North Eastern States. With the province of Burma separated from the rest of British India in April 1937 and formation of East Pakistan in 1947, the North East India suddenly became landlocked. This fact strengthened the strategic importance of Siliguri Corridor. This 22 miles wide strip of land connects the mainland India with seven sisters of North East India i.e, Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. Close to 40 million people live in this area³⁰. Though densely forested the area is a transit passage way and a real ethnic mosaic. Neither do the official borders nor the wooded mountains truly constitute insurmountable barriers. Ethnic kinship is visible on both sides. Ethnic groups in North East India come from China (Tibet) and Indo Chinese peninsula. The Ahoms who came from Shan territories in Northern Burma and Laos are part of Assam today. The tribes living on the either side of the borders are aware of the close ties, notably the Mizos, the Chins (on the Burmese side) and the Nagas present on the both sides. These ethnic groups, each rebelling against their central authorities, find refuge and support from their cousins notwithstanding the different state controlled borders. Drug trafficking and smuggling is rampant in this region along with the attendant problem of AIDS.

3.9 Land Routes to India. Myanmar extends 2080 Kms from North to South and shares border with five countries. Importance of Myanmar lies in

²⁸ Ibid. pp.52-53.

²⁹ Reuters. (2015). 'China has more subs, admits US naval officer'. *The Times of India*, 28 February 2015.

³⁰ Sinha, Tuli (2009). China-Myanmar Energy Engagements Challenges And Opportunities For India. *IPCS Issue Brief No 134*.pp 46.

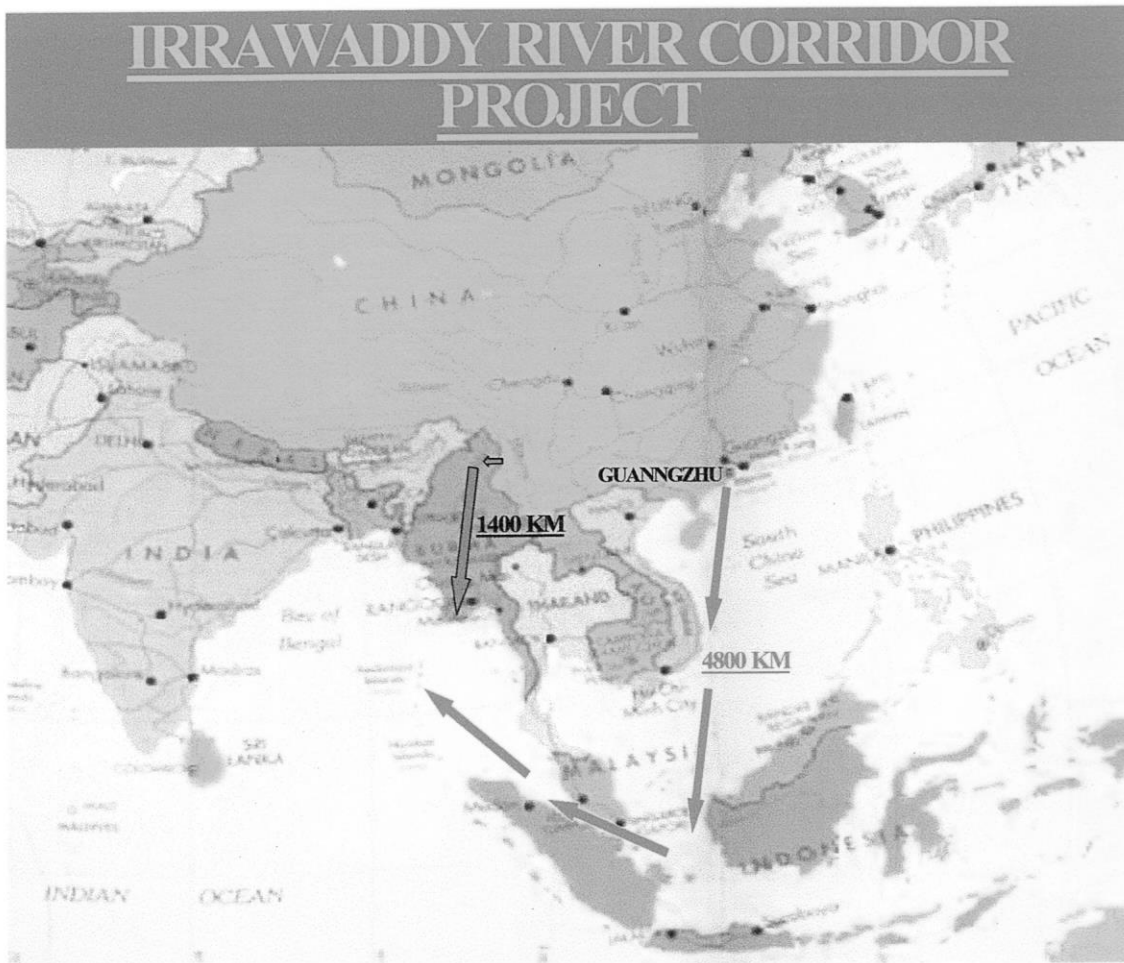
the fact that it provides access to India to the Southeast Asia and act as a bridge between SAARC and ASEAN. It also connects India to China via two old routes i.e Ledo-Stillwell axis connects Poshan in the Yunan province of China with Ledo in Assam, through Myitkyina and Imphal-Mandalay-Yunan. Myanmar provides facility to China to enter not only Bay of Bengal both through land routes and Irrawady River; it also allows China to exploit its close land lines to have any designs towards India in the east. PRC is also keen to build up the economy of South China by exporting cargo through a transportation access strip stretching from Yunnan to the Bhamo and onwards to the Bay of Bengal. Four Indian states share borders with Myanmar & improvement in communication network can bring rich dividends to the economy of these states. However, the Stillwell road which is now being upgraded to a four lane highway can also cause concerns for Indian security analyst.

3.10 River Transport Corridor System. Within Myanmar, most rivers run north to south, and provide the transport corridors. Myanmar is maintaining 12,800 kilometres of inland waterways, most of which is navigable by large commercial vessels. It allows sea traffic, reportedly upto 500 Mega Ton vessels, to navigate through Irrawaddy river till Bhamo, more than 1,000 kilometres inland and only 50 kilometres from the Chinese border. This fact has attracted the economic interest of China and they are keen to exploit this as a trade route primarily to develop the economy of southern China, by exporting goods through this transport corridor stretching from Yunnan to the Irrawaddy River at Bhamo and thence to the Bay of Bengal³¹. The Irrawaddy River is the country's main communication route as it runs across its entire length (north-south direction), for more than 2,000 kilometres. From the Myanmar's city of Bhamo in Kachin state, to the mouth of the river near Rangoon, the Irrawaddy is navigable all year round³². This strategic river has

³¹ Selth, Andrew (2001). The Asia Foundation Working Paper Series, Burma: A Strategic Perspective, Australian National University Working Paper. (Online) Available at [http://indianstrategic knowledge online.com/web/burma%202001.pdf](http://indianstrategicknowledgeonline.com/web/burma%202001.pdf) (accessed 12 January 2015)

³² Brar, C.S. Brig, (1995). *Sino-Myanmar Relation*. NDC paper 2/95, Pp 63.

always been used, either by the local kingdoms, the British or the successive invaders and now China is eyeing to exploit it to give access to its land locked Yunan Province. As for the south of the Myanmar, it is entirely open to the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, with almost 2,228 kilometres of coasts and islands.³³



Irrawaddy River Corridor Project : Myanmar's Concerns. In 2001, China had submitted a draft proposal to Myanmar entitled, 'Agreement on Highway-Waterway Combined Transportation, between the Governments of China and Myanmar.' This project was to give access to China into the Bay of Bengal in a major way. Though drudging work and construction of highway from Ruili in China to Mandalay via Bhamo has been completed, but this agreement has not been concluded even after President Jiang Zemin's visit to

³³ Verinder Grover, op.cit. p.79.

Myanmar. It is felt that Myanmar is not only being careful of Indian sensitivities, they are also worried of Chinese intentions, as Irrawaddy divides Myanmar vertically. China seems to be keen to use this waterway to ferry all types of goods, including hydrocarbon, arms and ammunition, without rights of inspection by the Myanmar Government.