

## SINO-MYANMAR RELATIONS AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIA'S SECURITY

**"China will extend its naval operations farther than the South and East China Seas to check attempts by India to dominate the Indian Ocean"**

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### CHAPTER I : INTRODUCTION

#### **1.1 General.**

India and Burma (now Myanmar) have a historical connection that goes back to the time of Ashoka, when Buddhism was spread in Burma. Since then, both countries have enjoyed mutual contact in the realm of trade, commerce, religion, law, political philosophy and culture. Both countries came under British colonial rule and Burmese leaders associated with Indian leaders during the struggle for national independence. Nehru and U Nu built up a personal friendship that formed the basis of good neighbourly Indo-Burmese relations, which with ups and downs has lasted many years. The British administered both India and Myanmar as one unit from 1886 to 1937 and both attained independence around the same time i.e. August 1947 and January 1948 respectively. The British brought number of Indians to Burma during its rule. There was no department of the public services, police, military or civil, without Indians in British Burma. However, post-independence various new rules and regulations ensured that large number of Indians had to return back from Myanmar.

India and Myanmar, who share a long and porous border stretching 1643 km, signed treaty of friendship in 1951, boundary agreement in 1967 and maritime boundary delimitation agreement in 1986. The 1950s was a period of great internal instability for Burma, which was marked by several insurgencies, forcing Myanmar to remain inward looking. Indo-Myanmar relations deteriorated soon after General Ne Win overthrew Prime Minister U Nu in 1962 and reached its nadir in 1988 when General Saw Maung seized power. As India closed its doors on self-exiled and isolated military junta of

Myanmar, China established inroads into Myanmar and assisted in the development of its economy, infrastructure and defence forces. Chinese presence in all walks of Myanmar life and the Myanmar's territorial waters has become a real source of concern and security for India and the region.



Myanmar, located between India and China, figures in an important way to influence the security matrix of the region in general and India in particular. The Chinese influence in Myanmar has been perceived by some to shift the security and power balance in the region. As on today, China has made deep inroads in Myanmar which propels India to bring about constructive engagement with Myanmar so as to safeguard its interest against Chinese assertive policies directed towards India.

### 1.2 **Statement of the Problem.**

To holistically analyse pro-active engagement policy of China towards the geo-strategically significant Myanmar, study its impact on all aspects of India's security and strategic interests and recommend way ahead, including measures to be adopted by India.

### 1.3 **Objectives.** To assess the impact of Sino-Myanmar relations on India's security and strategic interests, so as to arrive at the way ahead for India.

(a) Myanmar, India's eastern neighbour, provides physical and cultural connectivity between South and South East Asia. The geo-strategic location of Myanmar also dominates land and sea access in the region. Myanmar is of great importance to the region in general and India in particular, especially in view of India's 'Act East Policy'. Thus, there is a need to understand Indo-Myanmar relations in light of geostrategic relevance of Myanmar.

(b) There has been a rapidly growing Sino-Myanmar cooperation since 1988. Chinese penetration of Myanmar in developmental, infrastructure, natural gas and oil resources, besides its search for naval facilities in the Bay of Bengal, poses a serious threat to the security of India. Besides undertaking infrastructure development projects, China has been providing economic assistance and military hardware to Myanmar. It plans to expand the reach of the inland waterways of Myanmar to as close to Chinese border as possible. Thus, there is a need to understand the security nuances of the Chinese efforts to create strategic infrastructure, provide sea outlet to

its land locked Yunnan Province and to ensure security for Chinese energy needs, which are largely moved through the Indian Ocean. In light of the above, the strategic and security impact of Sino-Myanmar relations will be analysed in details.

(c) India needs to ensure that Myanmar does not become a 'client state' of China. Myanmar has to come out of the 'shadow' of China, which Myanmar also desires but is finding it difficult to do so. Thus, having analysed the Sino-Myanmar relations, the final objective would be to suggest way ahead for India to counter the designs of China in Myanmar.

#### 1.4 **Justification of the Study.**

Myanmar, situated at the crossroads of China, India, South East Asia and Bangladesh, shares 1643 Km long border with four sensitive states of India, where Tribal and insurgent groups on both sides share ethnic affinity. These groups include both factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and Manipur insurgent groups. Myanmar is not only a land bridge for India between South and South East Asia; it is also a gateway for impoverished landlocked South-western provinces of China to the Indian Ocean. The implications of this aspect in terms of geo-strategy, geo-politics and geo-economics are considerable. Myanmar also forms the eastern link of the containment girdle being constructed around India by China. Chinese penetration of Myanmar and its search for naval facilities in the Bay of Bengal poses a serious threat to the security of India. The defence of Burma is in fact the defence of India, and it is India's primary concern that Burma ensures that its frontier remain inviolate<sup>1</sup>. For India, it is a critical area for finding economic salvation for its Northeastern region and for bringing an end to the endemic insurgencies in the area. The menace of narcotics, drug trafficking and AIDS poses a severe threat to India thus necessitating India to engage Myanmar.

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<sup>1</sup> Panikkar, K. M. (1995). *The Future of India and South East Asia*. Bombay: Allied Publisher. p.43.



China has stolen a lead over India in the competition for influence over Myanmar, especially since 1988. In that watershed year, the military regime in Myanmar crushed pro-democracy riots and Myanmar became a recluse state for the international community including India. It was at this juncture that China came to Myanmar's assistance and lent them whole-hearted support. It was a masterly stroke played with finesse that fetched strategic advantages to China. Chinese penetration of Myanmar in developmental, infrastructure, natural gas and oil resources, besides its search for naval facilities in the Bay of Bengal, poses a serious threat to the security of India. China as compared to India enjoys a considerable head start in the race to woo Yangon's military leaders. Since 1988, Myanmar has become China's closest ally in South-east Asia, a major recipient of Chinese military hardware and a potential springboard for projecting Chinese military power in the region. During Maung Aye's trip to Beijing in June to mark 50 years of diplomatic ties, his host, Chinese President Hu Jintao, noted that strengthening Sino-Myanmar relations was an important part of China's diplomacy concerning its surrounding areas. By late 1991, Chinese experts were helping to upgrade Myanmar's infrastructure, including its badly maintained roads and railways. Chinese military advisers also arrived that year, the first foreign military personnel to be stationed in Myanmar since the 1950s. Myanmar was becoming a de facto Chinese client state.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, shrewd diplomacy and flourishing bilateral trade had accomplished for China what the insurgent Communist Party of Burma (CPB) had failed to achieve

South East Asian region has historically been a magnet for external powers because of its natural resources and strategic waterways. India being a neighbour state, has attempted to intensify its age old economic relations with South East Asian nations especially after launching its economic reforms programme, thereby giving a boost to its 'Look East Policy'. The two regions are geographically contiguous due to land border between India and Myanmar, besides the Andaman and Nicobar Islands chain, which is located near the

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<sup>2</sup> IISS Strategic Comments, July 2000. 'Ambitions in Myanmar: India Steps up Countermoves'. (Online) Available at [http://www.asiapacificms.com/articles/myanmar\\_influence](http://www.asiapacificms.com/articles/myanmar_influence) (accessed on 23 February 2015).

entrance to the Straits of Malacca. The maritime passages from the Indian to the Pacific Ocean are through narrow straits in South East Asia, which are of great strategic importance, being the potential choke points in the event of hostilities, economic blockade etc.

With the democratic developments in Myanmar, yet another opportunity has arisen for India to make amends for its Nelsonian attitude towards its Eastern neighbour. Though Myanmar continues to bask in continued attention from China, there are indications that perhaps it will not be entirely comfortable playing second fiddle to China. It is looking in other directions to seek a balance in its relations. The time is therefore ripe for India to take advantage of this situation and actively engage in an increased interaction with this erstwhile reclusive nation. It is in India's interest (and therefore in the interest of the region) that it seeks to make further amends for its policies towards Myanmar and actively seeks to cultivate it as a partner in regional development. Keeping in view the strategic importance of the region, India needs to invest considerably towards the development of Myanmar. India's Myanmar Policy needs to be guided by five drivers, which have recently been instrumental in the redrafting of India's Myanmar policy<sup>3</sup>. Each of these drivers has been so vital to India's national interest that they have forced India to overlook the concerns of pro-democracy groups in Myanmar.

- (a) Power centres in Myanmar are unlikely to change in near future.
- (b) Growing presence of China in Myanmar.
- (c) Quest for energy.
- (d) North-eastern insurgency.
- (e) Looking East.

Chinese influence in Myanmar has deep ramifications for India's

<sup>3</sup> Pandalai, Shruti. (2011). 'China's Entices Myanmar as India Struggles to 'Look East'. IDSA Comments. (online) Available at: [http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/Chinaenticesmyanmarasindiastrugglestolookeast\\_spandalai\\_110411.html](http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/Chinaenticesmyanmarasindiastrugglestolookeast_spandalai_110411.html) (accessed 10 August 2014).

security. It is a known fact that India is keen on combating the growing influence of the Chinese in Myanmar. Rather than looking at the issue in terms of 'strategic competition', India must do its best to promote trade, build infrastructure and have a cordial relationship with Myanmar at all levels. The Former External Affairs Minister, Mr Jaswant Singh, visited Myanmar in Feb 2001 to begin serious engagement with Yangon post 1988. It has picked up momentum and since then India has been pursuing its Look East Policy in the right earnest. This will have two pronged benefit. Firstly, it would strengthen the security of India's eastern flank, while providing a good chance to tap into the vast natural resources of the region. Secondly, it will help in checking the growth of Chinese influence on Myanmar and give an alternative way for development in Myanmar. Therefore, there is a necessity to place this relationship under the microscope, in a dynamic mode and assess the Sino-Myanmar relations and its security imperatives in order to derive options for India.

### 1.5 **Hypothesis.**

China's growing influence in Myanmar, along with its present engagement policy towards Myanmar, poses a threat to India's security and strategic interests in the region, necessitating proactive participation by India in the development of Myanmar.

### 1.6 **Scope of Study.**

The study will attempt to vet the hypothesis. After a brief historic perspective of Myanmar, geo-strategic and geo-economics importance of the region will be studied. Based on the above, strategic overview of India-Myanmar and Sino-Myanmar relations will be examined. Having brought to light the linkages between China and Myanmar, the study will specifically dwell upon the present social, political, economic and military cooperation having direct or indirect short and long term implications on India's security. Analyzing the strategic issues involved and possible threats to India, the study will endeavor to identify counter balances and suggest measures to be adopted by India against these threats.

### 1.7 Literature Review.

There is adequate literature available on the subject. The literature is basically authored by researchers from India and the Western world. However, there is very little literature available, in English, from authors from China and Myanmar. The important literature review from books and journals is as under:-

(a) Grover, Verinder. (2000). Myanmar Government and Politics. Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications Pvt. Ltd. This book gives an in-depth insight into history, geography and strategic location of Myanmar. It gives a very good account of initial relations of Myanmar with India and China as well as reasons of various anti India and anti-China riots in Myanmar. One should analyze whether the present situation of domination by Chinese in Myanmar is something parallel to the situation during pre-independence days till 1960s, when Myanmar was exploited by Indians and Chinese. The book deals with trends in China-Burma relations, which have fluctuated from snapping of diplomatic ties between the two countries in 1960's to strong strategic and economic linkages of today. Finally the book brings out details of Myanmar's foreign policy and analyses its continuity as well as changes. It gives a road ahead for our policy makers to deal with the current Chinese dominance in Myanmar.

(b) Egreteau, Renaud. (2003). Wooing the Generals, India's New Burma Policy. New Delhi: Authorspress, Centre de Sciences Humaines. This book deals right from the historical perspective of India-Myanmar relations till 2003. It deliberates on the strategic importance of Myanmar, which is significant for India's Look East policy. However, it emphasizes that Myanmar has been under influence of China and has become a Chinese node which also has ramifications on the strategically important Bay of Bengal. The book highlights the stakes involved in the geo-political frame work of relations between India and Myanmar, including India's response and the tools available for Indian diplomacy. It also deliberates on Indian



fantasies, which is pitched against the Chinese realpolitik, including Chinese encirclement of India. This contrast of Indian and Chinese policies in Myanmar will give a way forward for India in dealing with Myanmar.

(c) The Singh, Jasjit. (1996). India, China and Panchsheel. New Delhi: Sanchar Publishing House. This book deals with Sino-Indian relations. Having studied it in details, it is felt that it brings out only the way forward for India in its relations with China. However, direct or indirect linkages of Sino-Indian cooperation to Myanmar and dynamics of Sino-Myanmar relations are not adequately covered in this book.

(d) Panikkar, K. M. (1995). The Future of India and South East Asia. Bombay: Allied Publisher. . This book gives insight into India's Look East policy. The vintage of the publication of the book makes it more into realm of history as a number of new dynamics have shaped the environment since its publication. However, some of the strategic issues and underline idea of linkages of India and Southeast Asia are very relevant even today and it involves Myanmar as an important link towards India's Look East Policy.

Besides the books, there are a large number of journals available on the subjects, which have been browsed on the internet. Various strategic think tanks like Strategic Study India, CLAWS, IDSA and South Asia Analysis etc. are an important source for the study and have been contacted. Their articles in various journals are much focussed, updated and deal with certain important issues, as given under:-

- (a) Gareth Price has analyzed India's policy towards Myanmar in recent times and gives way ahead for India, in its relations with Myanmar.
- (b) Shyam Saran, the ex-Foreign Secretary of India, has deliberated on India's strategic interests in Myanmar.
- (c) H Sivananda has deliberated on China fulfilling part of its energy

needs through Myanmar, by writing about China's pipelines in Myanmar in IDSA Comments.

(d) H Sivananda has also made deliberations on Sino-Myanmar military cooperation and its implication for India, again as IDSA Comments.

(e) Sarabjit Singh Parmar has deliberated on the strategic importance of Indian Ocean by writing about Islandic Hop Scotch in the Indian Ocean Region.

(f) Shruti Pandalai has analysed Chinese deep engagement with Myanmar as India concedes the lead, through an article, 'China Entices Myanmar as India Struggles to Look East'.

(g) Prabhu Prasad Routrey, while writing for Jindal Journal of International affairs, has opined that post Look East Policy there has been a triumph of pragmatism by India, in its relations with Myanmar.

(h) Sreeram Chaulia, a professor at Jindal Global Business School, has analysed the way India and other countries help Myanmar to come out of the stranglehold of China.

Interaction with scholars from various think tanks, Military Intelligence, Defence Intelligence Agency etc. has also been carried out. However, being a research paper, which will be available in open domain, the aspect of security have been deliberated before incorporating any references and inputs from these sources.

## 1.8 **Methodology.**

The study will rely on secondary source as its backbone for data collection and information. The two main players' i.e. China and Myanmar, whose close relation has impact on India's security, are known to divulge very little about themselves. Thus the data originating from China and Myanmar will be scrutinized for its authenticity.

## 1.9 Chapterisation.

The subject has been structured as follows: -

- (a) Chapter I Introduction.
- (b) Chapter II Fact Sheet and Historical Perspective.
- (c) Chapter III Geo-strategic Importance of the Region.
- (d) Chapter IV Indian interests in Myanmar.
- (e) Chapter V Chinese interest and strategic engagements in Myanmar.
- (f) Chapter VI Implications for India on the growing Chinese influence in Myanmar.
- (g) Chapter VII Way ahead for India to secure its interest.
- (h) Chapter VIII Conclusion.

**Broad Contents of Each Chapter.** The broad aspects covered in each chapter are given in the succeeding paragraphs.

- (a) **Chapter I : Introduction.** This Chapter has already been covered.
- (b) **Chapter II : Fact Sheet and Historical Perspective.** This chapter deals with the fact sheet and historical perspective of Myanmar. The Burmese, descendants of various tribes migrated from central Asia; make up about two thirds of the population of Myanmar. Yet, Burmese traditions are more Indian than Chinese or Mongolian as the Hindu influence on arts and culture has been strong. By 1886, Rangoon and upper Burma were annexed by the British. In 1923 Burma was constituted as a Governor's Province under the Government of India Act, 1919. It was separated from India in 1937

and it remained under Japanese occupation from March 1942 to August 1945. Myanmar became independent on 04 January 1948 and U Nu became the first Prime Minister. In 1958, due to unstable politico-economic conditions U Nu invited General Ne Win to head the Government. In July 1962, Ne win founded the. This Burmese way of socialism brought Myanmar to the brink of economic collapse. Later, in 1988, in a bid to control spontaneous people's movement for democracy, a reign of brutal suppression was let loose in which a large number of people were killed. The Myanmar Armed forces under the mantle of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) assumed power on 18 September 1988 and changed Burma's official name to the "Union of Myanmar." SLORC promised that elections would be held and power handed over to the elected government as soon as law and order was restored. Aung San Sui Kyi (ASSK), daughter of the hero of Myanmar, General Aung San was placed under house arrest for a long time. Now there were winds of change blowing and democracy was being given some chance by holding elections in 2011.

(c) **Chapter III : Geo-Strategic Importance of the Region.** This chapter will highlight the geo-strategic importance of the region. Myanmar has been conscious of its geo-strategic importance and has tried to remain a neutral player in the international system, but economic and security imperatives have prompted Myanmar to look for help from regional powers and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This chapter will also bring out the importance of Myanmar being a strategic land bridge linking South and Southeast Asia and its capability to assist in dominating the waterways through Malacca Strait. Thus, Myanmar is of great strategic interest to the main players in the region, particularly to India and China.

(d) **Chapter IV: Indian Interest in Myanmar.** This chapter will deal with India and Myanmar relations in greater detail with particular reference to India's interests and policies towards Myanmar and major



factors contributing to the present state of relations. The issues of Indian insurgents operating from Myanmar's soil, drug routes and likely land route for Chinese aggressive designs through Myanmar are of prime concern to India. Myanmar is also an important member of ASEAN and acts as a link to boost Indo-ASEAN relations, which in the Cold War period remained a story of missed opportunities, mistrust, misperceptions and bungling diplomacy. At end of the cold war, Indian economy was at a perilous point, forcing India to adopt the path of economic liberalization and opening up its markets to respond to challenges posed by globalization. Thus India unveiled her "Look East Policy" to integrate her economy with the economies of South East Asia. India's emphasis on 'moral speak' as a policy started changing towards 'real politic'.

(e) **Chapter V: Chinese Interest and Strategic Engagements in Myanmar.**

This chapter will deal with the reasons for increased Chinese interest in Myanmar and its strategy of constructive engagement of Myanmar. China has developed huge strategic and economic interests in Myanmar. It is the largest trading partner of Myanmar, besides undertaking development of huge infrastructure projects in Myanmar. China wants to safeguard its oil supply route and also wants to provide its own landlocked South-Western provinces (Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan) with inland waterways cum sea route to the Indian Ocean. Apart from this with the presence of large number of hydrocarbon reserves in Myanmar Chinese footprints in Myanmar are making continuous inroads with rapid pace.

(f) **Chapter VI: Implications of Growing Chinese Influence on India.**

In view of Chinese policy of strategic encirclement of India with 'String of Pearls' in which Myanmar forms an important link, Indian security has been threatened to a very large extent by the growing Sino-Myanmar relations. This chapter will bring out the prominent threats to India with continued and increased presence of China in Myanmar. It will also include long term implications of insurgency in

Northeast India, drugs, arms smuggling, domination of sea lanes of communication and alternative approach for China, in case of hostilities with India.

(g) **Chapter VII: Way Ahead for India to Secure its Interest and Conclusion.**

This chapter will highlight the areas that have to be addressed by India to counter the Chinese influence and ensure that we use geographical, cultural, economic and historical linkages to boost our ties. It will highlight the way India can offer an alternative to Myanmar, to get out of Chinese hegemony. It will bring about the current steps being taken by India and recommendations on improving Indo-Myanmar trade relations, border trade, infrastructure development, people to people contacts and military co-operation etc. India has to avail every opportunity to enhance its links with Myanmar and South East Asia to secure its interests in the region.

(h) **Chapter VIII: Conclusion.** This chapter will see the summarisation of the dissertation and confirming that the hypothesis has been suitably and justifiably answered.