

# **Myanmar-India Interactions in the context of dynamic international environment**

**Professor Chaw Chaw Sein**

Strategic interactions between rising India and changing Myanmar are the two interesting players to shape the twenty-first century Asia since Asia has been assumed as an important region for global development economically and politically. Under one and half years of new civilian administration, Myanmar President and State Counsellor paid visit to India and China alternatively in 2016 and 2017. These visits illustrate how Myanmar is paying careful attention to the major powers in the region. Rising India under Prime Minister Modi's since 2014 and changing Myanmar are the two interesting actors to examine in the twenty-first century Asia. Myanmar sits on the blink of Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean, the busiest ocean and the most congested commercial shipping among the world's sea-lanes becomes crucial for China, India and to the extent for Japan and the US on freedom of navigation in the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean regions. In this regard, Myanmar strategic location can also be observed in the India's three strategic circles: inner circle, second circle, and outer circle. Insurgency in the Northeast India, which is border to Myanmar, is mentioned as one of the inner strategic circle of India. Indian Ocean and maritime security is regarded by India as second strategic circle and the East Asia in the east as part of outer strategic circles.

Myanmar is important to the stability and development of Northeast India as mentioned in the inner circle. Myanmar and India are continuously pursuing peaceful coexistence foreign policy with different variations in their bilateral relations. In the post-independence era of Myanmar, Myanmar-India relations cemented strong relations and solved the bilateral issues based on the personal

relationship between two Prime Ministers, U Nu and Nehru. The relationships became strained due to the 1988 Myanmar's democratic uprising along with the military coup and India provided the space for students to accept them as refugees along the border areas. After three years of isolating its relations with Myanmar, India recognized that this isolationism led to the closer Myanmar-China ties and realize to change India policy on Myanmar. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao started to initiate "Look East Policy" with the aim on focusing several points: India energy interest, the China factor, and the development of the North East India (NEI ) (the NEI included in inner circle) and market access to Southeast Asia through Myanmar. Border stability and development is important for both and in order to do so, operations on joint counter insurgency operations were carried out between two governments.

Second strategic circle for India is Indian Ocean and maritime security. In this context, naval diplomacy is a good example for India and Myanmar to strengthen friendships and also to cooperate in tackling maritime security issues. Both Myanmar and India had already cemented the naval to naval cooperation since Myanmar joined the India programme of "Milan" exercise in 2008. The present government's strong support for the maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal (BOB) between two countries can also be seen in the joint statement issued in the occasion of the state visit of the President U Htin Kyaw to India in August 2016. The year 2016 mark the fourth time of India-Myanmar Coordinated Patrol (IMCOR) since it has taken place in 2013. In 2016, India hosted the International Fleet Review at Vishakhapatnam port. It is the first time for Myanmar Navy to participate in the longest naval tour to engage with other countries' Navy.

This year in July, the commander- in-chief of Myanmar defense force visited eight-day tour to India. Vishakhapatnam is one of the cities he visited and the visit led to military-to-military cooperation. Myanmar security outlook can be highlighted as three key challenges that will still remain in the future.

One of the key challenges is unresolved border issue that is related to external involvement. The unresolved border issues in the Western part of Myanmar become current security implications for Myanmar Myanmar's neighbor to the West is overpopulated Bangladesh that is facing natural disaster like flood every year. To find or extend a living space in its neighbours is the only outlet for overpopulated country like Bangladesh. These illegal immigrants create the social issues and it led to the misunderstanding and conflicts among local community. This is one of the important issues and brings empathy as well as accusation for Myanmar and also deteriorating of the prestigious national image on the global context.

It will render the implications for the security of the BOB as the whole. Illegal immigrants from neighboring countries are the security concerns for both India and Myanmar and the visit of Prime Minister Modi is hoped to cooperate and find solution for tackling this issue. To tackle the terrorism and to build security architecture in the BOB, India hosts the meeting of the national security advisers and security chiefs of BIMSTEC countries in New Delhi in March 2017. BIMSTEC is celebrating twenty years of its establishment this year and India seems to continue to play a leading role to address the security issues. Illegal immigrants from neighboring countries are the security concerns for both India and Myanmar and the visit of Prime Minister Modi is hoped to cooperate and find solution to tackle the security issues.

India regards East Asia in the east as part of its outer strategic circles. In this context, Myanmar, which is located on the Southern tip of Indochina peninsula, will become an important partner for India. The year 2014 can be regarded as a remarkable year for both Myanmar and India. As for Myanmar, the country chaired the ASEAN for the first time in seven years after its membership of the association. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave a remarkable speech, which highlight the shifts of policy from "Look to Act East"

at the summit. This policy aims to move beyond its traditional limited focus on ASEAN and ASEAN-centric forums.

This also seeks to assert India's presence in various parts of Asia from Myanmar to Japan and Australia and the two Oceans. On the other hand, Myanmar under new civilian government is extending her foreign relations as well as opening up for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Japan seems to take the opportunities in investing deep-sea port project under Greater Mekong Sub region (GMS) that will connect Dannang (Vietnam) to Dawei (Myanmar). Japan is being interested to build infrastructure at Chennai in the Eastern coast of India so that Chennai- Dawei Corridor will be beneficial for Japan. In addition, it is found that the economic heart of India such as Delhi and Mumbai lie on the Western coast of India and there is no economic zone in eastern coast. It comes up with one of the considerable factors that how India can connect with Southeast Asia.

To implement effectively from the "Look to Act", Prime Minister Modi highlighted the a major paradigm shift in India's foreign policy to Act East focusing with 3 Cs, connectivity, commerce and culture at the East Asia Summit hosted by Myanmar in 2014. Myanmar-India cooperation in 3Cs can be observed in the regional groupings like ASEAN, BIMSTEC and Mekong Ganga Cooperation. To expand cooperation in the area of connectivity, Myanmar President U Htin Kyaw paid a threeday state visit to India in 2016 at the invitation of the President of the Republic of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee and signed four MoUs, two on connectivity and other related to medicine and renewable energy. As part of connectivity, MoU on the implementation of additional works of the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) was signed.

Another connectivity, Bangladesh- China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor will boost up the economic development of the region. This area is also the tri-junction of the three important markets of China, Southeast Asia and

South Asia. It can also interconnect the two major markets of China and India and even the markets in Asia as a whole. However, the Corridor, cannot be fully implemented due to the instability in the border with China. The armed groups such as Kokang and Wa with the support of China in border are a major hindrance for the connectivity to be successfully implemented. At the Strengthening Connectivity Partnership, Chinese President committed to US\$ 40 billion fund for infrastructure development among the Silk Road Economic Belt nations which involve the revival of the ancient Silk Road between China and Europe via Afghanistan and Central Asia, besides linking BCIM Corridor as well as China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

The second focusing area of 3Cs is Commerce. In order to promote trade between two countries, India-Myanmar business Conclave was held in Yangon in May 2016 and was attended by high-level business delegation led by Indian Ministry of Commerce Smt Nirmala Sitharaman. On this occasion, three MoUs were signed for cooperation in the insurance, power and banking sectors during the State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to India in October 2016 to attend the Outreach Summit between BRICS and BIMSTEC. The State Counsellor also attended the business roundtable or the roundtable discussion on business in New Delhi and invited Indian investment in Myanmar by explaining the new foreign direct investment law which would accord the same treatment to foreign companies as was being given to domestic companies. To expand bilateral trade and commerce, Myanmar issued a license to the State Bank of India to open a bank branch in Myanmar. Culture as the third focusing area of 3Cs is the easiest way to strengthen people-to-people relations. Capacity building, agriculture, education, healthcare and IT are directly linked to the well being of the people. The establishment of Myanmar Institute of Information Technology (MIIT) and Rice Bio-Park at Yezin University, Advanced center for Agricultural Research and Education (ACARE) in Nay Pyi Taw, are the invaluable support of India in order to become center of excellence.

However, there remain rooms for Indian Universities to collaborate with Myanmar universities such as Arts and Science, Engineering and Medicine. Indian scholar Nehginpao Kigpen, a Myanmar expert highlighted that it is necessary to improve three specific areas for two countries to make cooperation. These are education sector, democratic institution-building and people-to people contact. As a Myanmar scholar, it is suggested to encourage Indian Universities to have more collaboration with Myanmar universities. Both the University of Yangon and Mandalay University has signed MoUs with many world universities especially with Japan, China and Korea. Under these MoUs, international conferences, joint research, faculty exchange and student exchange programmes have been taking place with momentum. Although India is increasing the scholarships for the Myanmar students it is still limited in comparing with China and Japan. It is hoped that the visit of Prime Minister Modi will contribute the 3Cs and find positive ways in tackling the common security issues faced by both Myanmar and India.

### **References:**

- Swaran Singh, Lilian Yamamoto, Quads and Triangles: Locating Japan in India's Act East policy, Global Outlook, 2016.
- Joint Statement, Global New Light of Myanmar, 30 August 2016.
- Nehginpao Kigpen " Indian needs to do more in Myanmar" Myanmar Times, 27, April 2016.

### **Notes**

**Global New Light of Myanmar**, 7 September 2017

[www.burmalibrary.org/docs23/GNLM2017-09-07-red.pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs23/GNLM2017-09-07-red.pdf)