

CHINA'S SHADOW OVER INDIA'S MYANMAR POLICY

Rabindra Sen

Introduction

Developing friendly relations with China is an important priority of the Government of India.¹ India considers China as a 'foreign policy priority' and views the partnership as crucial for Asia's emergence as the political and economic centre of the new international order. 'As India's largest neighbour and a key emerging player in the international arena, China remains an important priority of our foreign policy and a key component of our 'Look East' policy,' said Pranab Mukherjee, then external affairs minister, in 2007.² China too recognises India's growing importance and attaches considerable importance to ties with New Delhi. Chinese president Hu Jintao has stressed that China regards its relationship with India as one of its most important bilateral ties.³ Although both China and India want to put their relationship on an even keel, at the same time these countries have had to contend with problems in their relationship, especially in the last few years.

While it is certainly true that in the first part of the last decade, there was a forward movement in bilateral relations, discordant voices pointing to doubts, apprehensions and anxieties about each other's intentions and actions are now being heard more strongly. Setting at rest the 'misconception' that India and China are emerging as rivals in the economic and political area, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has ruled out rivalry with China.⁴ But according to a study by the New Delhi - based Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), India and China will increasingly compete for resources, markets and influence. In a recent paper, Abanti Bhattacharya points out that even if the border

1 *News from China* (Embassy of the PRC in New Delhi), Vol.38, No.3, March 2006, pp. 13-14

2 *The Statesman*, 15 September, 2007.

3 *News from China*, Vol.23, No.4, April 2010, pp.6.

4 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has stated on several occasions that there is enough room in the world for India and China to achieve common development. See, *News from China*, Vol.23, No.9, September 2011, pp.6. During his three-day visit to India in December 2010, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao also said, 'China and India are partners for cooperation, not rivals in competition. There is enough space in the world for the development of both China and India.' 'China and India are partners, not rivals, says Wen Jiabao', *The Times of India*, December 16, 2010. For similar Chinese views see, *News from China*, Vol.23, No.4, April 2010, pp.4 and *News from China*, Vol.23, No.9, September 2011, pp.6. For a comment along the same line made by Chinese President Hu Jintao during his visit to India in November 2006, see C.P.P. Bhambri, 'Alter the pro-US prism', *The Pioneer*, 4 December, 2006. In 2010, an article in the opinion page of *People's Daily* of ruling Communist Party of China dismissed Sino-Indian rivalry as an 'outdated' and 'obsolete' geopolitical concept orchestrated by Westerners and media agencies. *The Times of India*, 2 October, 2010.

problem is resolved, India-China relations would remain essentially competitive and China would devise strategies to keep India a second-rate power.⁵

In this paper the purpose is to portray such competition between the two countries over Myanmar (Burma until 1989).⁶ As Sanjoy Hazarika quite appropriately observed in 2004, '... Myanmar now sees itself as crucially and attractively poised between two large suitors, each with a surging economy and a major market and, consequently, huge energy needs.'⁷ The key question is whether India's Myanmar policy is a function of China's strongly entrenched position in the strategically important Southeast Asian country, and more so given our perception of China.

The paper is divided into two sections. Discussion in the first section purports to highlight China's strong position in Southeast Asia today and then examine the close relationship it has with Myanmar. In the second section of the paper attention shifts to India's Myanmar policy against a backdrop of India's position in Southeast Asia and the importance New Delhi attaches to the region.

I

China-Southeast Asia Ties

Before we deal with China-Myanmar relations, the stage will be set with a review of China's position and influence in Southeast Asia after the end of the Cold War.⁸ China's growing influence in the world in general and in Southeast Asia in particular is attributable in no small measure to its diplomatic skills. Being a crossroads area, Southeast Asia has been repeatedly controlled or decisively affected in the past by external powers and influences. It is hardly surprising therefore that China's determination to protect its interests and expand its influence in the area has been a dominating feature of its foreign policy.

In the post-Cold War era, China's desire to forge a partnership with Southeast Asia has been designed to guard against and counter the influence of the United States, which China has come to perceive as the main threat. The US concern about China's growing economic and military muscles stems from apprehensions that an increasingly jingoistic China may in future well seek hegemony in Asia. China, on the other hand, considers the US as the hegemon threatening China. China may not openly point its finger to the US, but we do come across veiled references to the source of the threat perceived in the statements made by the Chinese leaders. The Chinese threat perception

5 Abanti Bhattacharya, 'Sixty Years of India-China Relations', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol.34, No.5, September 2010, pp.681. Jasjit Singh, former director of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, was quoted in the *International Herald Tribune* of 9 February, 2001 as saying that China was India's 'central strategic competitor economically, politically and military'. See, Amit Baruah, 'India steps up efforts towards engaging Myanmar', *The Hindu*, 12 February, 2001.

6 'Beijing's increasing influence in Myanmar ... has provoked concern in New Delhi, threatening to make Myanmar a pawn in Sino-Indian competition', observes Priscilla Clapp. Priscilla Clapp, 'Prospects for Rapprochement Between the United States and Myanmar', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.32, No.3, March 2010, pp.414.

7 Sanjoy Hazarika, 'Energy & Equidistance between two giants', *The Statesman*, December 21, 2004.

8 For details see Rabindra Sen, *China and ASEAN: Diplomacy during the Cold War and After*, Howrah: Manuscript India, 2000; see also the author's 'China's Diplomacy towards Southeast Asia: Aspirations and Achievements', in Arun Kumar Banerji and Purusottam Bhattacharya (eds), *People's Republic of China at Fifty: Politics, Economy and Foreign Relations*, New Delhi: Lancer's Books, 2001, pp. 155-70; and 'Follow the Leader', *The Telegraph*, 30 March, 2006.

extends to Japan for its special position as America's most important ally in East Asia. Beijing is also concerned about the warming of ties between Washington and New Delhi, particularly since the middle of the last decade.

China has responded to the challenge with a more pragmatic and flexible approach in its relations with its neighbours. Beijing has been actively engaged in 'smiling diplomacy' towards the ASEAN nations to counterbalance the United States. China has introduced modifications and adjustments in its policies on various sensitive issues in the hope of removing misgivings in the minds of the ASEAN leaders about its intentions. As a result of these adjustments and changes in China's policy, the traditional obstacles of Beijing's links with Communist parties in Southeast Asia and policy towards the ethnic Chinese minorities living in the countries of the region no longer obstruct relations with the ASEAN states. Also worth noting are the changes in Chinese positions with regard to the South China Sea issue and the ASEAN plan for turning Southeast Asia into a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ). China has not relinquished its sovereignty over the South China Sea, but tried to finesse the issue through diplomacy. In 2002, China signed a long awaited declaration on a code of conduct relating to South China Sea after four years of negotiations, albeit being initially opposed to the idea. With a few Southeast Asian countries having territorial claims in the South China Sea, the issue, however, continues to be a sensitive one in China - ASEAN relations, and especially so because of growing Chinese assertiveness about its claims over the area.

During the post-Cold War period, China's moves to strengthen relations with long time allies in Southeast Asia, and to re-establish links with others, who have been unfriendly in the past have borne substantial fruit. Besides the great improvement in China's bilateral relations with the ASEAN countries, growing China-ASEAN linkages at the institutional and multilateral level have considerably strengthened China's position in the region. The rise of China as an economic power in the post-Cold War era, which has attracted worldwide attention, has given Beijing's diplomacy towards Southeast Asia additional strength and pull. The Southeast Asian countries have a much bigger stake today in maintaining close relations with China. The 1997 Asian financial crisis lifted China's standing in the region and the world and also its economic leverage. The crisis years apart, China and Southeast Asia have enjoyed a steady expansion in trade and investment.⁹

More cordial ties with China will not automatically reduce the importance attached by the ASEAN countries with the United States. Above all, China's diplomatic efforts have not completely erased suspicions and misgivings in the region over Beijing's long-term intentions and role. Nevertheless it is beyond doubt that China now finds its position in Southeast Asia vastly improved. It has achieved considerable success in its drive to build cordial ties with ASEAN and boost its image through a deft handling of diplomacy. China's most important relationship will in any case remain the difficult one with the United States. Washington would want to preserve and regain its influence in the region. Beijing too would leave no stone unturned in its bid to protect and further strengthen its hard-earned position in the region.

9 Anita Inder Singh, 'China-ASEAN trade is expected to grow from the present \$ 350 billion to \$ 500 billion by 2015: Keeping Eastern Promises', *The Times of India*, 22 November, 2011.

China's Shadow over Myanmar

More than two decades have passed after the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar was crushed and the reins of power were seized by the military junta, though the country had in fact been under military rule since 1962. From the late 1980s, China was able to greatly expand its influence over Myanmar and consolidate its position further and further. Subjected to Western sanctions and with China backing it to the hilt with economic and military assistance, Myanmar became more and more dependent on Chinese support.

In recent years, significant developments have occurred in Myanmar as a result of the junta's roadmap to democracy climaxing in the 2010 elections and the advent of what has been called a 'nascent' or 'disciplined' democracy.¹⁰ Many, however, say that the change that has occurred, is a cosmetic one.¹¹ Be that as it may, the question that is important is whether the horizon of China-Myanmar relations now wears a different look. What do the Myanmar people feel about their close ties with China? If dependence has made Myanmar beholden to China, is it that Myanmar would like to balance it by forging closer links with countries like India and even the United States? Discussion of China-Myanmar relations is divided into two parts. An attempt will be made first to capture China's relations with Myanmar from the late 1980s to the early part of the last decade, and in the second part, the focus will mainly be on China's interests, dilemma, worries and problems concerning its relationship with Myanmar.

From the late 1980s onwards, the scope and importance of the China-Myanmar relationship expanded both economically and strategically, and clearly to the benefit of both the countries.¹² Myanmar emerged as a key Chinese ally on 6 August 1988, when the two countries signed an agreement establishing official trade across their common border – hitherto isolated Myanmar's first such agreement with a neighbour.¹³ Since then cross-border trade dramatically expanded, albeit occasional interruptions resulting from changes in Myanmar's trade policies. These interruptions did not prove to be major hurdles to cross-border trade.¹⁴ The two sides were also engaged in

10 Alope Sen, 'The Northeast and India's Myanmar Policy', at <http://www.enburma.net/.../723-the-northeast-and-india's-myanmar-policy...>, retrieved 17 October, 2011. See also, 'China's Myanmar Strategy: Elections, Ethnic Politics and Economics', *Asia Briefing*, No.112, September 2010, International Crisis Group, at www.crisisgroup.org/.../..., retrieved 17 October, 2011), pp.1.

11 The poll, Myanmar's first in twenty years, has been dismissed by critics as designed to ensure the military retains power with a civilian facade *The Times of India*, November 2, 2010. But very recently Thant Myint-U, a historian and former United Nations official, has said, 'The pace of political change in Burma has exceeded all expectations.' 'We're on the verge of a historic compromise.' Jackie Calmes & Thomas Fuller, 'New dawn: Suu Kyi to run in Myanmar polls', *The Times of India*, 19 November, 2011. American President Obama too has commented, 'after years of darkness, we've seen flickers of progress in these last several weeks', *The Times of India*, 19 November, 2011.

12 See, Allen L. Clark, 'Myanmar's Present Development and Future Options', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 39, No.5, September/October, 1999, pp.785-6.

13 *The Statesman*, 4 August, 2000, for a report by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), London.

14 Estimates of cross-border trade with China ranged from 40 per cent to 60 per cent of Myanmar's total trade in 1995-96, which made China Myanmar's most important trading partner. Legal and illegal cross-border trade were estimated to be worth over \$ 1 billion a year. See Stephen McCarthy, 'Ten Years of Chaos in Burma: Foreign Investment and Economic Liberalization under the SLORC-SPDC, 1988 to 1998', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol.73, No.2, Summer 2000, pp.251.

upgrading roads and rail links used for transporting goods into Myanmar and onward to the western seaboard ports along the Bay of Bengal coast.¹⁵

China was also a major source of economic assistance for Myanmar. In early 1998, Beijing provided a \$ 150 million loan to Myanmar to tide over a serious balance of payments crisis at a time when the country's foreign reserves were down to approximately \$ 90 million.¹⁶ China decided to stand by Myanmar in its hour of need, notwithstanding the adverse effect of efforts of the Yangon government to halt imports. The funds were given on top of the smaller loans and aid China had already been providing for specific projects. Aid and loans from China helped Myanmar maintain stability at home.¹⁷

Myanmar became China's closest ally in Southeast Asia, and was a major recipient of Chinese military hardware.¹⁸ The isolation and condemnation experienced by both the countries after the 1988 massacre in the Myanmar capital and the suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 helped draw them closer to each other.¹⁹ China's calculations in maintaining the best of relations with Myanmar were also strategic. Situated close to the key shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia, Myanmar could help China extend its military reach into a region of vital importance to Asian economies. Another important Chinese objective was to check the growing strategic influence of India.²⁰

Attracting most attention in Beijing-Yangon relations were Chinese military sales to Myanmar involving jet fighters, armoured vehicles, and naval vessels.²¹ Estimated at \$ 2 billion or more during the 1990s, the military sales enabled the Myanmar army to

15 Clark, 'Myanmar's Present Development and Future Options', pp.786. Chinese engineers and technicians in northern Myanmar have helped build and improve roads running both east to west and north to south from the China - Myanmar border. The speculation among officials in neighboring India, Vietnam and Thailand was that Beijing wanted both a new trade route and a strategic southern outlet to the Indian Ocean. See, Rodney Tasker and Bertil Lintner, 'Danger: Road Works Ahead', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 21 December, 2000, pp.26. See also, Bertil Lintner, 'Burma Road', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 November, 1997, pp.16. The Chinese built a port and shipyard at Thilawa, near Yangon. The Irrawaddy River was dredged to allow for bigger barges to carry goods south from China to this Indian Ocean port. Stephen B. Young, 'China Holds the Indochina Key', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 June, 2002, pp.24.

16 Tasker and Lintner, 'Danger: Road Works Ahead'.

17 Tasker and Lintner, 'Danger: Road Works Ahead'. China's expansion into Myanmar has come by way of unofficial interest-free loans, arms aid, and direct investment in business and infrastructure. Much of this has taken place on account of the need to bridge the gap caused by the U.S. led veto on aid from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. See, McCarthy, 'Ten Years of Chaos in Burma ...'

18 See, IISS report, 2000.

19 See, IISS report, 2000. Myanmar needed China to countervail the USA and other Western Powers. James Wong Wing On, 'Sino-U.S. flurry to win allies', *The Statesman*, May 16, 2001.

20 See, IISS report 2000.

21 Myanmar reportedly acquired from the People's Republic of China the HAIG Karakorum-8 (K8) two seat basic jet trainer and light ground attack aircraft co-developed by China and Pakistan. See, *Strategic Digest*, Vol. 30, No.8, August 2000, pp. 1131-2. High-ranking military exchanges have occurred fairly frequently in the post-Cold War era. See table in John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp.264; pp. 263-74.

expand from 180,000 men to 450,000.²² Beijing also helped Yangon modernize its naval bases at Hianggyi, the Coco's islands, Akyab and Mergui by building radar, refit and refuel facilities that could support Chinese submarine operations in the area.²³ China was also believed to have helped establish a Signals Intelligence facility on the Coca's islands, 30 km. from the Andamans, to monitor Indian missile tests off the Orrisa coasts, an activity that increased following the nuclear tests carried out in 1998.²⁴ Of utmost importance to the government in Myanmar was the fact that the Chinese were staunch backers of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), and subsequently the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), especially when support from other countries was difficult to obtain. Needless to say, therefore, the close political, military and economic ties with China were the main pillar of support, and a major source of comfort to the ruling junta in Myanmar. In the light of what has happened in Myanmar recently, it is especially noteworthy that China was the only country to recognise and forge party-to-party ties with the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a military-backed mass organisation modeled on the Golkar, Indonesia's former military-backed ruling party during the New Order regime of President Suharto.²⁵ On 25 October 2000, when Lt. Gen. Win Myint flew to Beijing, he was greeted not by his title as a senior member of the SPDC, but as Vice-President of the USDA.²⁶ It was, indeed, an extremely pleasant surprise, and in a meeting with Chinese Politburo member Li Ruihuan, the Myanmar leader gratefully acknowledged the friendly gesture saying that his country would always stick to its policy of developing friendship with China.²⁷

It would, however, be wrong to think that relations between Beijing and Yangon during the period now under focus were absolutely problem-free. The influx of Chinese migrants in northern Myanmar was altering the whole demographic balance there.²⁸ This naturally stirred a degree of concern not only inside the country, but even beyond.

22 Anthony Davis, 'China's Shadow', *Asiaweek*, 28 May, 1999, pp.32. For details of China's military supplies to Myanmar in the 1990s see, Swaran Singh, 'South Asian Security and China', in Banerji and Bhattacharya (eds) *People's Republic of China at Fifty*, pp.251.

23 Rahul Bedi, 'Burma-Pak-China nexus feared', *The Asian Age*, 7 July, 2000. These islands are located at a geographically important point in the shipping lanes between the Bay of Bengal and the Straits of Malacca. See, Lee Jae-Hyung, 'China's Expanding Maritime Ambitions in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.24, No.3, December 2002, pp.554; 549-68.

24 Bedi, 'Burma-Pak-China nexus feared'. In January 2011, however, former Chief of Naval Staff Admiral (ret'd) Arun Prakash said that China has not set up a naval base or even a listening post on the Coco Islands. See, Jayanta Gupta, 'No China presence in Coco', *The Times of India*, 16 January, 2011. China is investing to set up port facilities in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar. However, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar have made it clear that they would not allow China to use such facilities for military purposes. *Ibid.*

25 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 November, 2000, pp.10. The military junta in Myanmar tried to project itself as the true representative of the people, and made membership of the USDA virtually compulsory for civil servants and anyone seeking favour of the generals. The USDA recently transformed into the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and this army-backed party won the 2010 elections by a landslide.

26 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 November, 2000, pp.10.

27 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2000, pp.10.

28 See, Davis, 'China's Shadow', pp.30-32. See also, Anjali Ghosh, 'Myanmar and Regional Security' in Suchita Ghosh and Rabindra Sen (eds), *Southeast Asia: Security in the Coming Millennium*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers Limited, 2000, pp. 285-6. Mandalay is like a Chinese city now. Of its population of about a million, at least a third are Chinese. Raghu Dayal, 'Towards An Asian Century', *The Times of India*, 15 November, 2011.

A bit of wariness therefore did seem to creep into what in the mid - 1990s was a virtual strategic alliance. It seemed that Yangon might eventually want to pull itself back a little from the embrace of its giant neighbour.²⁹ The developments in Indo-Myanmar relations, especially the noticeably frequent visits by leaders of the two countries which pointed to a desire on both sides for closer bilateral relations and their implications, should be seen in this light.³⁰

The scepticism was not one-sided. The Chinese leaders appeared to be not too happy with Myanmar's inability to sort out its internal problems or to get its floundering economy back on track. In spite of the element of uneasiness in bilateral ties, however, the main thrust of Myanmar's policy towards China continued to be avoidance of conflict, and cooperation with it on a majority of issues, especially those directly impinging on Myanmar's security interests. Beijing too had a big stake in Myanmar, and wanted to continue to engage itself in efforts to keep relations with Yangon warm. This was amply proved by Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit to Myanmar in mid-December 2001. Extending a warm welcome to Jiang Zemin Myanmarese leader, Khin Nyunt, expressed the belief that the visit would further promote the development of bilateral good-neighbourly and friendly relations and enhance the *pawkpaw* friendship between the two peoples.³¹ During his visit, President Jiang Zemin declared that Myanmar 'must be allowed to choose its own development path suited to its own conditions.'³²

Although Myanmar cannot take China's support for granted, it knows well that Beijing's goodwill has not come for free.³³ Myanmar is immensely important for China and over the years as the Chinese have built up their stakes further and further Myanmar's importance in the eyes of China has only increased. Myanmar is important for China as a trading outlet to the Indian Ocean for its landlocked inland provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan. Moreover, Myanmar is potentially important for China for achieving its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean and its long-term two-ocean objective.³⁴

29 Even within the highest levels of the SPDC, there was growing concern about Chinese influence becoming too strong and the growing presence of Chinese illegal immigrants (including refugees from China's 1998 flooding). Although Khin Nyunt went for a state visit to Beijing in early June 1999, foreign observers reported a cooling of Beijing-Yangon ties. See, Donald M. Seekins, 'Burma in 1999 : A Slim Hope', *Asian Survey*, Vol.XL, No.1, January/February 2000, pp.21.

30 For the significant improvement in relations between Myanmar and India, see, Tin Maung Maung Than, 'Myanmar (Burma) in 2000: More of the Same?', *Asian Survey*, Vol.XLI, No.1, January/February 2001, pp.154-5. The growing influence of China in Myanmar is one of the prime concerns of India. For a detailed discussion of China's 'long march' into Myanmar, and the resultant Indian concern see, J. Mohan Malik, 'Sino-Indian Rivalry in Myanmar: Implications for Regional Security', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.16, No. 2, September 1994, pp.137-56.

31 See, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn>, retrieved 20 December, 2004. See also, 'President Jiang Zemin Holds Talks with Chairman Than Shwe of the State Peace and Development Council of Myanmar', 12/12/2001, at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn>, retrieved 20 December, 2004.

32 Mark Landler, 'Isolated Burma opens up to trade with affluent China', *The Asian Age*, 2 January, 2002.

33 Juergen Haacke, 'China's role in the pursuit of security by Myanmar's State Peace and Development Council : boon and bane?', *The Pacific Review*, Vol.23, No.1, March 2010, pp.121.

34 Poon Kim Shee, 'The Political Economy of China-Myanmar Relations: Strategic and Economic Dimensions', at www.ritsumei.ac.jp/acd/cg/ir/college/bulletin/e-vol1/1-3_shee.pdf, retrieved 17 October, 2011, pp.50.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that Naypyidaw has been quite grateful for Beijing's support, especially in relation to dealing with international pressure regarding Myanmar's most prominent democracy campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi. Since 2005, Naypyidaw has sought to rely on Beijing's diplomatic protection in the United Nations Security Council, first of all to avoid the inclusion of the Myanmar issue on the agenda, and if necessary to ward off possible resolutions that ultimately might lead to clamour for the imposition of international multilateral sanctions against Myanmar and add an impetus to calls for external intervention.³⁵ In January 2007, the People's Republic of China and Russia both exercised veto power against a US-UK draft UNSC resolution.³⁶ China remained protective of Myanmar again after the demonstrations led by Buddhist monks in September that year which were suppressed by the military with an iron hand. Although the crackdown led to a huge international outcry, Beijing played a key role in toning down the UNSC presidential statement released in October the same year.³⁷ At the trilateral Russia-China-India foreign ministers' meeting at Harbin in China, Chinese foreign Minister Jang Jiechi asserted, 'We hope the countries concerned will play a helping role instead of applying sanctions and applying pressures.'³⁸

An economically developing Myanmar will help open up China's south-west and enable China to have a more balanced growth *vis-à-vis* its eastern seaboard.³⁹ Stability in Myanmar is even more important as China tries to secure its energy supplies through oil and gas pipelines across the country.⁴⁰ The Chinese are committed to Myanmar as a country, but not necessarily to any regime. Whether there is a military or democratic government in Myanmar is not China's concern. Beijing wants a government that is friendly and able to promote and protect its national interests, particularly its economic interests.⁴¹ Neither the roadmap for transition to democracy nor national elections were seen by Beijing as a challenge to its interests. Rather, Beijing hoped that they would promote its strategic and economic interests by producing a government perceived both domestically and internationally as legitimate.⁴²

China was prepared to accept any poll result that did not involve major instability.⁴³ Junta chief Senior General Than Shwe visited China before the election held in November 2010. Upon Than Shwe's arrival in Beijing on 7 September, Chinese government spokeswoman Jiang Yu said at a press conference that the Chinese leaders would not talk about the election in meetings with the top general. 'The general election in Myanmar is its internal affair. We always uphold the principle of noninterference in others'

35 Haacke, 'China's role in the pursuit of security ...', pp.119.

36 Haacke, 'China's role in the pursuit of security ...' pp.121. China was rewarded with the A-1 and A-3 blocks of gas off the coast of Myanmar. See, Ann Koppuzha, 'India's Myanmar Policy : An Alternative Roadmap', *IPCS Issue Brief*, No.77, July 2008, pp.1.

37 Haacke, 'China's role in the pursuit of security ...' pp.121.

38 G. Parthasarathy, 'Don't even think of sanctions', *The Pioneer*, 10 January, 2008.

39 Harn Yawngwe, 'United States - Myanmar Relations: On the Threshold of Rapprochement? A Response', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.32, No. 3, March 2010, pp.429.

40 Harn Yawngwe, 'United States - Myanmar Relations: On the Threshold of Rapprochement? A Response', 2010, pp.429.

41 Harn Yawngwe, 'United States - Myanmar Relations: On the Threshold of Rapprochement? A Response', March 2010, pp.429.

42 *Asia Briefing*, International Crisis Group, pp.1.

43 *Asia Briefing*, pp.1.

internal affairs,' she said.⁴⁴ She said that a peaceful, stable and progressing Myanmar served not only the people in Myanmar but also the countries in the region.⁴⁵ President Hu Jintao said that China's Myanmar policy would remain unchanged 'regardless of the international situation', and that it was China's unswerving policy to solidify and develop good neighbourly cooperation with Myanmar.⁴⁶ Than Shwe in his turn affirmed his commitment to developing strategic relations with China in the post-election period.⁴⁷

The following excerpt from the Position Paper of the People's Republic of China submitted at the Sixty-Sixth Session of the United Nations General Assembly gives us a clear idea about the basic parameters of China's Myanmar policy. As stated above, what matters to China most is, stability, national reconciliation and progress in Myanmar and that China would put the country before the regime, not the other way round,

The formation and smooth operation of the new government marks important progress in the democratic process in Myanmar. China hopes to see political stability, economic development and social progress in Myanmar. The Myanmar issue is, in essence, the country's internal affair. The international community should provide constructive help to Myanmar and create an enabling environment for it to advance national reconciliation and steadily achieve democracy and development. Imposing sanctions and pressure will not help resolve the issue. China supports the good offices of the UN Secretary-General and his Special Advisor, and will continue working with the international community to provide support and assistance so as to contribute to democracy and development in Myanmar.⁴⁸

Beijing's top concern in Myanmar is preventing conflict on its 2,192 km long shared border, which could affect China's domestic stability and regional economic development.⁴⁹ Beijing was caught off guard by the Myanmar military's offensive into Kokang in August 2009 that sent more than 30,000 refugees into Yunnan province.⁵⁰ Many in Beijing saw the unexpected attack on the heels of a surprisingly positive visit to Myanmar by American Senator Jim Webb, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Subcommittee on Southeast Asia, and against the background of warming US-ASEAN ties, as a calculated attempt on the part of Myanmar to distance itself from China and contribute to an adjustment of the regional balance of power.⁵¹ Myanmar perhaps wanted to demonstrate the limits of Chinese influence in the country. Be that as it may, the sequence of events was so alarming to Beijing that the Chinese foreign ministry went to the extent of warning that the SPDC should 'properly deal with its domestic issue to safeguard the regional stability in the China-Myanmar border area' and ensure the safety and legal rights of Chinese citizens in Myanmar.⁵² The Kokang conflict and the rise in tensions along the border prompted Beijing to increasingly view

44 Wai Moe, 'Opposition Leader: China's Burma Policy Could Backfire', http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=19442, retrieved 17 October, 2011.

45 Wai Moe, 'Opposition Leader: China's Burma Policy Could Backfire', 2011.

46 Wai Moe, 'Opposition Leader: China's Burma Policy Could Backfire', 2011.

47 Wai Moe, 'Opposition Leader: China's Burma Policy Could Backfire', 2011.

48 *News from China*, Vol.23, No.9, September 2011, pp.28.

49 *Asia Briefing*, International Crisis Group, pp.15.

50 *Asia Briefing*, pp.15.

51 Clapp, 'Prospects for Rapprochement Between the United States and Burma', pp.417.

52 Clapp, 'Prospects for Rapprochement Between the United States and Burma', pp.416.

Myanmar's ethnic groups as a liability than strategic leverage.⁵³ Notwithstanding the problem, Beijing has sought to consolidate political and economic ties with its south-western neighbour by stepping up visits by top leaders, investment, loans and trade.⁵⁴

There are two factors that greatly impact Beijing's calculations. Beijing sees Washington's moves toward a policy of engagement in relation to Myanmar as a potential challenge to its influence in Myanmar and part of US strategic encirclement of China.⁵⁵ China also sees Myanmar as having an increasingly important role in its energy security.⁵⁶ China is building major oil and gas pipelines to tap Myanmar's rich gas reserves and shorten the transport time of its crude imports from the Middle East and Africa.⁵⁷ Chinese companies are also expanding rapidly into Myanmar's hydropower sector to meet Chinese demand.⁵⁸ Beijing is bent on increasing its political and economic presence to solidify its position in Myanmar.⁵⁹

Yet, China faces dual hurdles in realising its political and economic goals in Myanmar. Internally, Beijing and local Yunnan governments have differing perceptions of and approaches to border management and the ethnic groups. Attaching topmost priority to border stability, Beijing is prepared to sacrifice certain local commercial interests, while Yunnan values border trade and profits from its special relationships with ethnic groups.⁶⁰ Second, resource extraction activities of some of the Chinese companies in Myanmar are giving rise to strong popular resentment because of their lack of transparency and unequal benefit distribution, as well as environmental damage

53 *Asia Briefing*, pp.15.

54 *Asia Briefing*, pp.15. China has strong investment and trading links with Myanmar, accounting for two-thirds of investment in the country and almost half of its bilateral trade. See, Tom Wright, 'India Raises Its Game in Burma', at www.defence.pk/forums/.../135442-india-raises-its-game-burma.html, retrieved October 24, 2011.

55 *Asia Briefing*, pp.1. A Kachin political analyst has said that China is worried about increasing American influence on Myanmar. Commenting on the PLA military facility in Yunnan's Menghai Township being built opposite Mongkoe town in Myanmar's northern Shan state and close to the Tibet-Myanmar-Arunachal trijunction, Sig Bum Htoi, a military analyst based in Mongkoe, has said, 'I think Chinese troops are being stationed there to monitor foreign troops, especially US soldiers should they enter Myanmar'. See, Manas Paul, 'China worried over growing US influence on Myanmar', *The Times of India*, 29 December, 2010. For an analysis of the prospects for rapprochement between the US and Myanmar, See, Clapp, 'Prospects for Rapprochement Between the United States and Burma', pp.409-25. Although there still is considerable pressure on the US government to continue with sanctions and not much has happened yet to take the relationship forward, the recent visit of the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the first by a high-ranking American diplomat in half a century, assumes a great deal of significance.

56 *Asia Briefing*, International Crisis Group, pp.1.

57 *Asia Briefing*, pp.1.

58 *Asia Briefing*, pp.1.

59 *Asia Briefing*, pp.1. In a little over one year since March 2009, for example, three members of the Politburo Standing Committee visited Myanmar boosting commercial ties by signing major hydropower, mining and construction deals.

60 *Asia Briefing*, pp.1. Since several groups have long-standing links across the border with China and have benefited from extensive border trade and traffic with it, this could be a potential area of conflict between the two countries. See, Shyam Saran, 'The Virtue of Pragmatism', *The Times of India*, 7 August, 2010. Chinese influence with some of the most important cease-fire groups, which are largely composed of ethnic Chinese such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA) is perhaps seen in Naypyidaw as a complicating factor. See, Clapp, 'Prospects for Rapprochement Between the United States and Burma', pp.414.

and forced displacement of communities.⁶¹ The Myitsone mega-dam on the Irrawaddy River, a joint venture with China, is a glaring example. Many believe such resentment was behind the April 2010 bombing of the Myitsone hydropower project.⁶² And this year finally on 30 September 2011, Myanmar's new president, Thein Sein, dropped a bomb-shell, announcing in a statement to the parliament the suspension of the project because 'it was contrary to the will of the people'.⁶³ Public opinion may no doubt have played a part. But as Bertil Lintner argues, dissatisfaction within the armed forces over China's growing influence in Myanmar is a more likely reason for the move to suspend the dam project. The decision could signal the Myanmar military's disenchantment with China or at least a show of desire to distance itself from the powerful neighbour if only to win western support, explains Lintner.⁶⁴

According to Vikas Kumar, China's current Myanmar policy presents a number of challenges in the medium to long term.⁶⁵ Myanmar could be a potential source of humanitarian refugees. Ethnic conflict in Myanmar might spill over and encourage independence movements among ethnic minorities in China. Another challenge is the escalating sunk costs of Chinese investments. There is also the possibility of Myanmar turning more and more to China's competitors to stave off Chinese pressure. Last but not least is the possibility of a popular backlash.⁶⁶

Amidst speculation about China's future standing and influence in Myanmar, former Indian ambassador to Myanmar, Alope Sen, raises an appropriate question – 'If they are able to find greater acceptance from the rest of the world with their new openness, would Myanmar's leadership still need China's protective umbrella?'⁶⁷ Howsoever difficult it may be to answer the question with a degree of certainty, what is clear is that the relationship between the two sides is considerably more complex than would meet the eye. Harn Yawngwe rightly observes, 'while the prevailing assumption is that Myanmar is a client state of China, this is an oversimplification and ... the ruling generals are as anxious to keep the Chinese at bay, as they are to keep the West out. Contrary to popular belief, it is more in China's interests to have a stable, economically vibrant and independent Myanmar on its doorstep than to have an unstable, unpredictable and economically stagnant client state.'⁶⁸ A Myanmar government official has recently opined, 'we do not want our country to become a satellite state of the Chinese government. However, Western countries should not

61 *Asia Briefing*, pp.1. Despite the flurry of Chinese activities in Myanmar, few jobs have been created for local people. The forests of the north and east have been chopped down, the jade mines of the Kachin Hills denuded and many endangered species hunted and shipped. Raghu Dayal, 'Towards An Asian Century'.

62 *Asia Briefing*, pp.1.

63 Bertil Lintner, 'Burma Delivers Its First Rebuff to China', *Yale Global Online*, at <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/burma-delivers-its-first-rebuff-china>, retrieved 17 October, 2011.

64 Bertil Lintner, 'Burma Delivers Its First Rebuff to China' 2011.

65 Vikas Kumar, 'China's myopic Myanmar policy', at <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/.../2011/09/30/china's-myopic-myanmar-polic...>, retrieved 17 October, 2011.

66 Vikas Kumar, 'China's myopic Myanmar policy' 2011. Before the 2010 election, Win Tin, a leader of the Opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), said China's promotion of the repressive regime and the unfair elections through a non-inclusive political process could spark more anti-Chinese sentiment among the people which in turn could threaten the stability of Chinese investments in Myanmar. See, Moe, 'Opposition Leader : China's Burma Policy Could Backfire'.

67 Sen, 'The Northeast and India's Myanmar Policy'.

68 Yawngwe, 'United States - Myanmar Relations ...', pp.429.

force us into a corner where we have no option but to increasingly rely on China'.⁶⁹ Srinath Raghavan of the New Delhi based Centre for Policy Research has also observed, 'Myanmar does not wish to be locked in an exclusive embrace with China.'⁷⁰

The debate is likely to go on and on. But China's current ranking as Myanmar's pre-eminent external partner is unlikely to change any time soon. China is too big, strong and proximate. Despite difficulties with China, Myanmar itself is taking every care to see that it remains deeply engaged with Beijing. One may cite the recent visit to China by Myanmar's Vice-President Tin Aung Myint, coinciding with President Thein Sein's visit to India in October 2011, ostensibly to attend the opening of a China-ASEAN trade event, but in reality perhaps to explain Myanmar's decision to block the \$ 3.6 billion Myitsone dam after environmental protests.⁷¹ While from Myanmar's point of view China continues to remain too important and powerful to ignore, Chinese support to and influence over Myanmar cannot be said to have put it wholly at the receiving end and in a condition which does not allow any kind of maneuverability. China too is under pressure and knows well that it has to be more accountable for its actions in future if it is to preserve and sustain cordial relations with Myanmar. Now let us see how India has fared, what its stakes and interests in Myanmar are, the importance Myanmar attaches to ties with India and most importantly how much of India's Myanmar policy can be explained in terms of the China factor.

India-Myanmar Relations

India-Myanmar relations and the importance we attach to ties with Myanmar have to be viewed against a backdrop of our ties with ASEAN which form the core of our 'Look East' policy, and more so because Myanmar is the second largest country in Southeast Asia. The following outline of India's ties with Southeast Asia would clearly show that Indian influence in the region, though much weaker than that of China, cannot be discounted as insignificant. India through its 'Look East' policy has certainly been able to raise its profile in Southeast Asia.

Looking Towards ASEAN

Southeast Asia is an important region. It is especially so for India because we share maritime boundaries with several ASEAN countries and both a land and maritime boundary with Myanmar. The 'Look East' initiative was intended to realize India's desire and hope of deepening the partnership with the ASEAN countries. Frequent high level visits, especially in recent years, by Indian leaders have brought into a sharper focus India's keen interest in forging ties with the Southeast Asian nations. Needless to add, this has been reciprocated by the Southeast Asian leaders who have acknowledged India's strategic footprint in the Asia Pacific region and want India to play a larger, meaningful and stabilising role in the region.⁷² After the initiation of India's 'Look East'

69 Lintner, 'Burma Delivers Its First Rebuff to China'.

70 Wright, 'India Raises Its Game in Burma'.

71 Indrani Bagchi, 'Look East: Govt. to boost Vietnam, Myanmar ties', *The Times of India*, 8 October, 2011.

72 Rabindra Sen, 'India's Look East Policy: Some Observations', in Rabindra Sen, Tridib Chakraborti, Anindya J. Majumdar and Shibashis Chatterjee (eds), *Power, Commerce and Influence : India's Look East Experience*, New Delhi: Lancer's Books, 2009, pp.3.

policy, the ASEAN-India relationship has grown from sectoral dialogue partnership in 1992 to a full dialogue partnership in 1995 and subsequently even to a summit level interaction. The progressively closer relationship has led to strengthening of not only economic ties between ASEAN and India, but also political and security linkages with India joining the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996.⁷³ Over the years, collaborative initiatives have been launched between ASEAN and India in a variety of fields and strong institutional mechanisms for ASEAN – India cooperation have been put in place.⁷⁴ Apart from regular high-level dialogue, contacts at the official, business, cultural, academic, media and people-to-people levels have been revived and reinforced.⁷⁵

Strengthening economic linkages between the two sides is a priority for India and ASEAN. Bilateral trade is growing rapidly, though the volume of India-ASEAN trade pales into insignificance in comparison with that of China-ASEAN trade. ASEAN provides a bridge for India to connect with the Asia-Pacific. For India's own neighbourhood peace, security, stability and development, the ASEAN and the Indian Ocean Region are strategically important and constitute an integral part of our consciousness.⁷⁶ As part of our 'Look East' policy reference may also be made to BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) which brings five countries of the Indian Subcontinent (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) together with two countries from South East Asia (Myanmar and Thailand) for promoting regional cooperation. The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) is another initiative bringing together India and five ASEAN countries – Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. India is also a member of the East Asia Summit.

India's Myanmar Policy

Myanmar, being geographically the closest Southeast Asian country, has a high priority in India's regional policies.⁷⁷ As Sanjoy Hazarika observed, '[The] bridge between India and Southeast Asia is not the Northeast. It is Myanmar. The Northeast and Southeast Asia are bridgeheads. Myanmar is the key.'⁷⁸ In fact, Myanmar is a bridge between the countries comprising the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (where Myanmar has observer status) and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).⁷⁹ Geographically India and Myanmar share long land and maritime boundaries, including in the area of the strategically important Andaman and Nicobar islands where the two closest Indian and Myanmar islands are barely 30 km apart.⁸⁰ Myanmar ports provide India the shortest approach route to several of India's Northeastern states.⁸¹ Myanmar's geostrategic importance for India therefore

73 Seema Gaur, 'ASEAN-India Ties Entering a New Phase', *Viewpoints*, 8 October, 2003, [www.iseas.edu.sg/viewpoint/sg 8 October 03, pdf](http://www.iseas.edu.sg/viewpoint/sg%208%20October%2003.pdf), retrieved January 25, 2009, pp.1.

74 Seema Gaur, 'ASEAN-India Ties Entering a New Phase', *Viewpoints*, 2003

75 A.N. Ram, 'India's Foreign Policy in the Asia-Pacific : Contemporary Issues,' *Area Studies*, Vol.1, No.1, January-June, 2007, pp.23.

76 A.N. Ram, 'India's Foreign Policy in the Asia-Pacific : Contemporary Issues, pp.24.

77 J.N. Dixit, 'A matter of security', *The Telegraph*, 29 March, 2001.

78 Sanjoy Hazarika, 'Wisdom in wooing Myanmar', *The Statesman*, 5 December, 2000.

79 Gurmeet Kanwal, 'Why India needs Myanmar on its side', at news.rediff.com, retrieved 13 November, 2011.

80 Gurmeet Kanwal, 'Why India needs Myanmar on its side', 2011.

81 Gurmeet Kanwal, 'Why India needs Myanmar on its side', 2011.

needs no overemphasising. As former Indian foreign secretary J.N. Dixit wrote in an article published in 2000:

Myanmar abuts on our sensitive northeastern states and portions of Bangladesh. It shares an equally significant border with China. Thus, the northern frontiers of Myanmar constitute a tri-junction with Bangladesh, China and the eastern frontiers of India. Myanmar is also an important country lying on the rim of the Bay of Bengal. The southern coast of Myanmar is close enough to the Nicobar and Andaman islands. So developments in that region could affect our security interests in the Bay of Bengal.⁸²

Emphasising the importance of Myanmar as India's neighbour former Indian foreign security Shyam Saran observes, 'The geopolitical rationale of good India-Myanmar relations is ... patently obvious and even compelling'.⁸³

In the initial period after independence, Indo-Myanmar relations were very close.⁸⁴ The relationship, however, was negatively affected as a result of the seizure of power by the military in Myanmar in 1962.⁸⁵ A period of intense xenophobia and insularity pushed the country into near isolation with a resultant downturn in ties with India.⁸⁶ Domestic policies including the expulsion of ethnic Indians and later a closer Sino-Myanmarese axis soured the relationship with India.⁸⁷ There was no break in relations, but they were maintained at the formal level and there was not too much economic, political or technological cooperation in bilateral relations between the two countries.⁸⁸ When the generals suppressed the popular uprising of 1988, nullified the overwhelming election victory by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), India's initial reaction was sharp.⁸⁹ India gave asylum to fleeing students and a base for their resistance movement and supported a newspaper and a radio station that propagated the democratic voice. But then reality intruded. India's strategic rivals, China and Pakistan, began to court the Myanmar generals and were rewarded with major economic and geopolitical concessions.⁹⁰ India's rivals were gaining ground in its own backyard, while Indian businesses were losing out on new economic opportunities.⁹¹ The price of hoisting up policy on a high pedestal of morality became too high. So India's policy underwent a 180 degree change. From standing up for democracy and the resultant estrangement, New Delhi settled for a policy of engaging and aiding the military regime in Yangon.⁹² In March 1992, Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao took the decision to activate relations with Myanmar. The decision to repair the relationship was part of a larger 'Look East' policy.⁹³

82 J.N. Dixit, 'Sitting with the generals', *The Hindustan Times*, 22 November, 2000. See also, Dixit, 'A matter of security', and Saran, 'The Virtue of Pragmatism'.

83 Saran, 'The Virtue Of Pragmatism'.

84 Dixit, 'Sitting with the generals', 2000.

85 Dixit, 'Sitting with the generals', 2000.

86 C. Uday Bhaskar, 'The Myanmar Matrix', *The Times of India*, 25 November, 2000.

87 C. Uday Bhaskar, 'The Myanmar Matrix', 2000.

88 Dixit, 'Sitting with the generals', 2000.

89 Shashi Tharoor, 'Knight Of The Generals', *The Times of India*, 10 November, 2010.

90 Shashi Tharoor, 'Knight Of The Generals', 2010.

91 Shashi Tharoor, 'Knight Of The Generals', 2010.

92 Shashi Tharoor, 'Knight Of The Generals', 2010.

93 Dixit, 'Sitting with the generals', 2000.

Bilateral relations in the mid-1990s nevertheless witnessed a series of hiccups. India's decision to award the Jawaharlal Nehru memorial prize for international understanding to Suu Kyi overruling the reservations of Myanmar's military regime infuriated the Myanmar government. Then there was the Indian defence minister's accusation that Myanmar's relationship with China constituted a security threat to India and that Myanmar was becoming a partner in the Chinese objective of strategic encirclement of India.⁹⁴ However, by the end of 1999, interactions between foreign ministers of the two countries at various meetings at ASEAN removed the irritants and misunderstandings created by these events.⁹⁵ Since 2000, relations between the two countries have stabilised and civil and military officials have met regularly to take bilateral ties further. The large number of high-level dignitaries travelling to and from Myanmar indicates the priority being accorded to bilateral relations.

India has been slower than China to develop infrastructure in Myanmar and to benefit from its natural resources, but appears to want to redress the balance. India has announced it would lend \$ 500 million to Myanmar to help develop projects, including irrigation works.⁹⁶ Trade and economic cooperation between the two countries have been growing steadily. The trade turnover, which was just \$ 13 million in 1980-81,⁹⁷ now stands at US \$ 1.5 billion.⁹⁸ Indian Commerce and Industry Minister Anand Sharma has recently said, 'I propose that we work towards doubling of bilateral trade by 2015.'⁹⁹ Myanmar has huge oil and gas reserves and not surprisingly is an attractive target for India's energy diplomacy. However, the potential has not been fully actualised because of certain political and economic reasons.¹⁰⁰ India has assisted Myanmar in a number of fields. India hopes to expand engagement with Myanmar at all levels, but mainly economic. Apart from security and border issues, India is looking forward to cooperation in cross-border development projects, oil and gas, power, railways, telecommunication, education and training.¹⁰¹ The first decade of the present century has witnessed growing strategic engagement between India and Myanmar. According to the Indian Ministry of external affairs, relations with Myanmar have become truly multifaceted, 'with cooperation in a range of developmental and other projects in the areas of roads, power, hydro-carbon, oil refinery, transmission lines, telecommunications and information technology.'¹⁰²

As Myanmar is often perceived to be a buffer state between China and India, it is only natural for these two countries to engage in a competition for diplomatic and material gains. India knows that China has a distinct advantage, but China cannot rule out the possibility of Myanmar opting for an occasional 'India tilt'.¹⁰³ What is important is the Myanmar leaders 'see their interests best served by a more balanced relationship

94 Dixit, 'Sitting with the generals', 2000.

95 Dixit, 'Sitting with the generals', 2000.

96 Wright, 'India Raises Its Game in Burma'.

97 'Myanmar to continue anti-Naga rebels help', *The Hindustan Times*, 18 November, 2000.

98 'India wants to double trade with Myanmar', at articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com> collection, retrieved 13 November 13, 2011.

99 'India wants to double trade with Myanmar', 2011.

100 Yogendra Singh, 'India's Myanmar Policy : A Dilemma Between Realism and Idealism,' *IPCS Special Report*, at www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/..., retrieved 17 October, 2011, pp.4.

101 Sachin Parashar, 'Myanmar army strongman arrives today', *The Times of India*, 25 July, 2010.

102 Kanwal, 'Why India needs Myanmar on its side'.

103 P.P.S. Suryanarayana, 'Junta's dilemmas', *Frontline*, 20 April, 2007, pp.58.

with the two neighbouring giants.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, there is no gainsaying the fact that China and India both figure prominently in each other's calculations when these two countries deal with Myanmar. Myanmar Foreign Minister U Win Aung had said in 2001, 'we in the middle are very much strategic. We would like to see India and China as peaceful, big neighbouring countries. If they were fighting against each other, we would not be peaceful. That's why we are now having better relations, good relations with China (and) at the same time good relations with India'.¹⁰⁵

What led India to take a second look at its policy towards Myanmar and decide to embark upon the policy of 'constructive engagement'? The specific objectives of reviving relations with Myanmar, according to former Indian foreign secretary J.N. Dixit were, first, to create cooperative arrangements between the two countries to counter secessionist activities on both sides of the India-Myanmar border, and second, to ensure that Myanmar's security and foreign policies remained balanced in terms of Myanmar's relations with China and India.¹⁰⁶ A third objective, Dixit argued, was to enhance mutual cooperation in controlling the illegal trafficking of drugs from the 'Golden Triangle' across sub-continental India to other parts of the world.¹⁰⁷ And the fourth objective was to create equations with Myanmar to safeguard India's security interests in the Bay of Bengal and the shipping lanes.¹⁰⁸ One of the considerations, as has been stressed already, was Myanmar's geostrategic importance.

To quote Dixit again, to carry out 'India-Myanmar cooperation to counter narcotics, insurgency and security threats to our northeastern states were acknowledged as imperatives for our foreign policy'.¹⁰⁹ Let us discuss these imperatives briefly before turning to the China factor for explaining our policy. India and Myanmar share a long unfenced border, allowing militants from the northeast to use the adjoining country as a springboard to carry out hit-and-run guerrilla strikes on Indian soldiers. At least five major militant groups from India's northeast, where numerous tribal and ethnic groups are fighting for greater autonomy or independence, have training camps in the dense jungles of Sagaing in northern Myanmar.¹¹⁰ Myanmar rebels, primarily the Chins and the Arakanese, have likewise often taken shelter on the Indian side.¹¹¹ It is in the interest of both countries to cooperate with each other to fight these insurgent groups in a coordinated manner.¹¹² 'Border management' has been an imperative for India. India has got some support from Myanmar to flush out Indian insurgent groups operating from its soil. Coordination between Indian and Myanmar security forces in counter-insurgency operations has grown dramatically in recent years, especially since 2004 when Than Shwe visited India.¹¹³ In September 2011, the Myanmar army launched two offensives in quick succession in Sagaing province against various Indian militant groups. Despite the fact that Myanmar has been taking action against Indian insurgents in their territory, their continued presence there has made some

104 Saran, 'The Virtue of Pragmatism'.

105 *The Hindu*, 17 February, 2001.

106 Dixit, 'A matter of security', 2001.

107 Dixit, 'A matter of security', 2001.

108 Dixit, 'A matter of security', 2001.

109 Dixit, 'Sitting with the generals', 2000.

110 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 'India and Myanmar Poised to Boost Ties', at <http://www.worldpress.org/Asia/2865.cfm>, retrieved 29 September, 2011.

111 Kanwal, 'Why India needs Myanmar on its side'.

112 Kanwal, 'Why India needs Myanmar on its side'.

113 Chaudhury, 'India and Myanmar Poised to Boost Ties'.

Indian officials sceptical about the operations.¹¹⁴ Howsoever limited the results are, in the absence of the co-operation India has received from Myanmar in combating the problem of insurgency the situation would clearly have been worse. India-Myanmar cooperation is also essential to control narcotics trafficking and to curb the proliferation of small arms in the region.¹¹⁵

Let us now come to the crux of the matter – the question as to the extent to which the China factor explains the shift in India's Myanmar policy. There is no gainsaying the fact that this factor heavily influences India's foreign policy in general, its Myanmar policy being no exception. J.N. Dixit unequivocally pointed out, '... China's Southeast Asian policies have become a major factor influencing India's policies towards the ASEAN and specially towards Myanmar'.¹¹⁶ In C. Uday Bhaskar's words, 'Indian geo-strategic interests are defined by the abiding existential challenge of China and the influence it exerts on the Indian periphery including Myanmar'.¹¹⁷ India wanted to try and stem the growing Chinese clout and realised that it could not do so by shutting itself out of Myanmar. Brahma Chellaney observed, 'India cannot afford to shut itself out of Burma, or else – with an increasingly assertive China to the north, a China-allied Pakistan on the west, a Chinese-influenced Burma to the east, and growing Chinese naval interest in the Indian Ocean – it will get encircled'.¹¹⁸ To quote J.N. Dixit again, 'It was equally important to ensure that Myanmar does not become part of an exclusive area of influence of other powers in the region with whom India has uneasy relations (China, for instance)'.¹¹⁹ One of the issues that India was anxious about was the increasing strategic links between Myanmar and China. There were reports of the Myanmar government providing some visiting and berthing facilities to the Chinese navy.¹²⁰ Indeed, the threat of unfettered Chinese influence in Myanmar is one of New Delhi's man ripostes when India is questioned about its ties with Yangon.¹²¹

India is also concerned about Pakistan's long standing military ties with Myanmar. The India-Myanmar relationship presents a complex scenario, given the Sino-Myanmar, Sino-Pakistan and Pakistan-Myanmar triangle of relations.¹²² For several years New Delhi supported Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratic movement in Myanmar, but went in for a realpolitik after finding much to its dismay that Beijing had stepped into the vacuum to forge strategic links with Yangon.¹²³ The growing influence of China in India's doorstep caused deep concern among the Indian policy planners. 'This led us to take a hard look at our previous policy and decide to build bridges with the government in power', explained an Indian diplomat.¹²⁴ India has thus ramped up diplomatic as well

114 Rakhi Chakraborty, 'Baruah & Khaplang flee Myanmar Swoop', *The Times of India*, 14 September, 2011.

115 Kanwal, 'Why India needs Myanmar on its side'.

116 Dixit, 'A matter of security', 2001.

117 Bhaskar, 'The Myanmar Matrix'.

118 Brahma Chellaney, 'Counter China's Designs', *The Times of India*, 16 January, 2008.

119 Dixit, 'Sitting with the generals', 2000.

120 Dixit, 'Sitting with the generals', 2000. When this point was raised with the Myanmar authorities they denied any military facilities being given to China and added that they would be willing to give general facilities to the Indian Navy in their ports and on their coasts.

121 Simon Robinson, 'India's Burma Silence Says Volumes', *Time*, 29 September, 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1666859,00.html>, retrieved 15 October, 2011.

122 Chaudhury, 'India and Myanmar Poised to Boost Ties'.

123 Ranjit Pandit, 'Eye on China, army chief on Myanmar visit', *The Times of India*, 11 October, 2009.

124 *The Times of India*, 2 September, 2000.

as military ties with Myanmar to counter China's deep strategic inroads there. Recently as the US President Barack Obama called on India to back US policies on Myanmar, top Indian officials made it clear that India was not looking at modifying its foreign policy even in lieu of American support for a permanent United Nations Security Council seat. They said, India was engaging Myanmar because of strategic and security reasons. "We have security reasons as well as strategic interest in engaging with Myanmar," said a source, adding that India was not going into any bargaining game over Myanmar.¹²⁵

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that China has cast a long shadow over India's Myanmar policy. But it would be wrong to think that the shadow completely envelops India's Myanmar policy. China's leverage over Myanmar may well be the most important factor, but it is not the sole *raison d'être* of India's policy of engaging Myanmar. There actually are several motors driving India's multifaceted Myanmar policy. We should not view things always and wholly through the Chinese prism. As an editorial in *The Times of India* put it, 'For India to reap the full benefits of its Look East strategy, it must stop looking at the region through the prism of China. It must assert the autonomy of its foreign policy engagements with the ASEAN bloc and beyond.'¹²⁶ The following editorial comment which had appeared in *The Hindu* more than a decade ago is also worth citing. Reflecting the thinking among the policymakers in New Delhi, the editorial opined, 'In a regional context without the Sino-Indian angle, New Delhi tends to portray its economic ties with Yangon within a South East Asian framework.'¹²⁷

It is true that China enjoys considerable influence over Myanmar. It is also true that China has an edge over India, the Chinese shadow over Myanmar being thicker than that of India. But New Delhi or for that matter other countries should not consider Myanmar as merely a puppet and a pawn in the hands of the Chinese – not having its own identity and interests and blindly toeing the Chinese line. It should also be borne in mind that policies of both China and India are Janus-headed, with one side being active and acting as the front while the other is in the shadow and appears to be, but in fact is not, fully inactive. A dramatic change in the situation in Myanmar may well cause the side now in the shadow to come out and push the other into the shadow and thereby resulting in a policy swing. This seems applicable to both India and China. Most importantly, Sino-Indian competition in Myanmar and as a matter of fact Sino-Indian relationship as a whole should not be viewed as a zero-sum game. Needless to say, a stable, economically vibrant and independent Myanmar would be in China's as well as India's interests. To cite another example of a convergence of Chinese and Indian interest, neither China nor India want to see a nuclear Myanmar. Harn Yawng hwe quite plausibly asks – is there a way for US, China, India and ASEAN to work together to bring change to Myanmar?¹²⁸ It is deemed appropriate to conclude our analysis with the following observation: 'For the future geopolitics of the region, Myanmar holds the

125 Sachin Parashar, 'Govt. unlikely to foe US line on Myanmar, Iran', *The Times of India*, 10 November, 2010. Without naming China, the source said, India could not be expected to play 'brain-dead' when another country north of Myanmar was very active there. 'Myanmar is not a country on the dark side of the moon but a country on our borders with which we have to deal', said the official.

126 'Push The Envelope', *The Times of India*, 14 October, 2011.

127 'Reaching Out To A Neighbour', *The Hindu*, 16 February, 2001.

128 Yawng hwe, 'United States – Myanmar Relations ...', pp. 431.

unique distinction of being the only country where India and China have huge stakes and growing presence. It's a test case for how India and China learn to live with each other in this region.'¹²⁹

129 Indrani Bagchi, 'Gen visit to deeper ties with Myanmar', *The Times of India*, 26 July, 2010.

