

Topic: India and Myanmar Relations: Prospects and Impediments in our Bilateral Engagement (post 2010)

Presenter: Dr. Amrita Dey, Fellow, MAKAIAS

External Expert: Lt. General John Mukherjee

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Time: 3.30 pm

Venue: Azad Bhavan, Salt Lake

Rapporteur: Mili Ghose, Research Fellow, MAKAIAS

Dr. Amrita Dey, in her presentation, attempted to examine the prospects and impediments in India and Myanmar relations, post 2010, given the advantage of geography, our time-tested relationship, the Indian people in Yangon and how New Delhi's tryst with democracy for 63 years can push Myanmar's own experiment with democratisation in the years to come. On the whole four considerations have been instrumental in redrafting the India Myanmar policy, each of which is extremely vital to its national interest: (a) Myanmar's genuine transition to democracy, (b) Myanmar's image makeover sans China, (c) Border security and better connectivity in the Northeast and (d) Capacity building and human resource development. According to Dr. Dey, it was in 1992 that India's Myanmar policy took a pragmatic turn away from shallow idealism, when New Delhi decided not to interfere in the internal affairs of that country and start a policy of constructive engagement with the military regime then in power. India promoted military to military contacts between the two neighbours, arms shipment to Burma, counter-insurgency operations along the frontier states, while fully trying to exploit the economic benefits of the country and diplomatically handle the Chinese threat in Burma. The same spirit has flowed through India's felicitation of the genuine changes taking place in Myanmar during its gradual transition to disciplined democracy post 2010.

On the domestic front, according to Dr. Dey, evidence of genuine changes in Myanmar after the elections of 2010 were visible through the involvement of civil society groups within the democratisation process, ensuring freedom of the Press and incorporation of the democratic icon Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy within the Parliament. In January 2012, the government had released all prominent political prisoners and in tackling ethnic problems it had promised national reconciliation and resumption of peace talks with all ethnic armed groups, including the introduction of a new legislation to teach ethnic languages in state primary schools encompassing the ethnic regions during the 2013-14 educational years. In its foreign relations, Myanmar's policy witnessed a steady re-orientation from disengagement to pragmatic engagement with USA, the European Union and regional powers closer at home. On 20 May, 2013, President Thein Sein visited the White House, ending his nation's long isolation from the West for nearly 50 years. Thein Sein's visit came six months after the US President Obama's visit to Yangon in 2012 and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit in November 2011. Besides USA, EU and Australia dropped all sanctions against Myanmar, while India and Japan undertook several measures to cement bilateral ties with Myanmar. Indian Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, during his visit to Myanmar in 2012, signed several agreements, including the one involving the setting up of the Myanmar Institute of Information Technology and other small development projects in the border region. Prime Minister Singh's goodwill visit was reciprocated by Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to India

in November 2012. India even assured Myanmar of the completion of the Kaladan project by 2014 and the Trilateral Highway by 2016. All these positive developments have caused the ASEAN countries to award the chairmanship of the organization to Myanmar for 2014.

Dr. Amrita in her conclusion highlighted the positive strides in India and Myanmar relations - Border Liaison Offices in the Northeast; India-Myanmar naval engagement; capacity building and human resource development, despite significant 'loses' in the energy sector, over-obsession with China and 'softer projection' in people-to-people contacts. She made the following observations aimed at removing the impediments in India and Myanmar bilateral engagement in the years to come:

- a) *Strike a more 'pragmatic strategy' than one mired in idealism and 'big-talks';*
- b) *Stick to deadlines and find alternative sites of promoting trade and business;*
- c) *It's high-time India needs to decide the place and role of India's Northeast in its relation with its neighbors. Given the strategic importance of its northeastern frontier bordering Tibet and Myanmar, India needs to decide whether they should be a gateway to both, Southeast Asia and China— or merely a barrier.*
- d) *Public/private sector involvement in 'soft power' projection of India can be a lucrative option when Myanmar is opening up to the world.*

Comments of the External Expert

Having congratulated Dr. Dey for her excellent presentation, external expert, Lt.Gen John Mukherjee advised her to look into the following points for further research:

- The role of the local ethnic population vis-a-vis the Chinese and the volatile borders between Myanmar and Thailand that should be monitored to stop opium smuggling into India's North Eastern states.
- How India in cooperation with the Myanmar military can negotiate peace and ceasefire agreements with insurgent groups like NSCN Khaplang, Nagas and Assamese ULFA.
- He also advised her to study the implication of investment in the private and the public sector in the North East and study the background of economic development like growth and investment in the North East and make a comparative study with other parts of North east India.

Question and Answer Session

There were questions on the viability of Myanmar's 'disciplined' democracy given the fact that many observers are sceptical of genuine changes in Myanmar;

Questions were also raised on the viability of India's engagement with Myanmar through Northeast India, given the practical impediments in tackling the insurgency problems and illegal activities carried out across these volatile borders over a long span of time;

There were comments on Myanmar's signing a ceasefire with NSCN (Khaplang) likewise India which has concluded a similar agreement with them and even with NSCN (Issac-Muivah);

There were comments on theoretical problems in using the word 'dropped' instead of 'suspension' when discussing Myanmar government's suspension of contract with China on the Myitsone dam.