

# India needs to defeat the British policy in Myanmar

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India's strategic isolation, caused by a neighborhood inherently unfriendly and suspicious because of India's size, and one still trying to adjust to the realities of the post-Cold War period, needs an immediate change and such a change may come through defeating the British-directed policy toward Myanmar (formerly Burma).

There have been a number of signals in recent months which suggest that the Myanmar authorities are keen to break out of their own isolation, and open up trade relations with their neighbors, including India. In fact, India-Myanmar bilateral relations took a significant step forward in January 1994 when the two nations signed agreements to strengthen relations and prevent the cross-border movement of insurgents, drug-traffickers, and smugglers, and to promote border trade between the two countries.

## The China factor

Poised between two great Asian neighbors, China and India, Myanmar remained unstable for decades because of ethnic conflicts, massive drug trafficking, and the Beijing-engineered communist movement. Following the Sino-Indian border clash in 1962, arising out of the delineation of borders left unmarked by the British colonialists, Myanmar became the staging ground of many insurgent groups from northeastern India, the most notable among them being the Nagas.

Unmanned borders and an active Chinese interest saw the insurgents from northeast India getting arms training in Myanmar to challenge the authority of the Indian government. Some of these insurgents went to Beijing for cash and arms while Phizo, the most powerful of the Naga insurgent leaders, led his rebellious army from Britain.

As a subset of hostile relations with China, India's relations with Myanmar were less than cordial. Although China stopped providing assistance to the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) in the early 1980s, Delhi was upset with report of the Chinese reconstruction of the old Stilwell Road linking China's Yunnan province with northern Myanmar, which Delhi perceived as Beijing's concerted thrust to get access to the Bay of Bengal, and eventually to the Indian Ocean, thereby posing a security threat not only to the eastern coast of India but also to the maritime trade between Arabia and East Asia.

The report that China had already established facilities in Myanmar's Coco Islands, north of India's North Andaman Islands, and that China was seeking air and naval facilities at Kyaukpu (where the Allied forces had built an airstrip during World War II to supply the advancing British Army in Burma) in Romree Island, raised serious doubts in New Delhi about Myanmar's intentions. Interception of Chinese "fishing vessels" equipped with sophisticated electronic equipment off the Andaman Islands close to India's naval base at Port Blair deepened the suspicions further.

Besides these military developments, which pose a serious security threat to India's east, the hard-line imposition of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) under a military junta following the nullification of a duly-elected government in 1988, practically broke off India's relations with Myanmar. The sheltering of Burmese pro-democracy activists in India and their vocal denunciation of the SLORC was seen as the result of the deterioration of Myanmar-India relations. India made it clear how much it disapproved of the house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi, the victor in the fateful elections and the granddaughter of Aung San, a Burmese freedom fighter who is greatly respected in India. In fact, the SLORC was criticized the world over, pushing Myanmar into isolation.

## Changes in attitude

But the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet empire, and the improvement of relations between India and China, which actually had begun before the demise of the Soviet Union, brought about a new situation, and attitudinal shifts within the Myanmar leadership's worldview began to appear. Equally important were the change in attitude within the international community, led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), toward the Myanmar regime, and placing the issue of Aung San Suu Kyi and the pro-democracy movement in perspective.

In January 1994, Myanmar authorities, by signing an agreement with the Indian government, made it evident that they would not play the stooge for anyone by harboring Indian insurgents within Myanmar. In the subsequent period it has been noticed that the insurgents are setting up camps in Bangladesh, and Myanmar is refusing to play host to them any longer.

In July, ASEAN officially toned down its stance toward Myanmar during the ASEAN meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, and made clear that the organization's soft stance toward Myanmar had been vindicated. The rest of the international community has finally come round to the idea that further isolation of Myanmar would be counterproductive.

The presence of the Myanmar foreign minister at the ASEAN meeting in Bangkok and the softening of tone toward Myanmar by Australia and New Zealand, widely considered as the two representatives of the West living on the fringe of Asia, were also part of this trend.

### **Containing Chinese influence**

The Chinese decision to ease tensions with India, exhibited during the late Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit and his meeting with Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in the winter of 1987, played a major role in the improvement of bilateral relations between India and Myanmar.

It should be obvious to India by now that, while the Chinese influence in Myanmar cannot be reduced, and in all likelihood will continue to grow, an improved India-China equation will ensure that Beijing will not use Myanmar as a cat's paw to strike at India. On the other hand, by isolating Myanmar because it is being influenced by China will only ensure that the Chinese alone will have any say in Myanmar affairs. More importantly, and this is where the British are at work, Myanmar will become a possible hotspot from where both India and China can be nettled and weakened. An insurgent-infested northeast India does not bode well for New Delhi under such conditions.

In early October, Myanmar authorities conveyed to India that their country will not have any military pact or military understanding with China. Speaking to a correspondent of the Indian news daily *The Hindu*, a senior Myanmar Foreign Ministry official pointed out that his country had never granted bases to the Chinese and no Chinese facility exists on Myanmar soil.

Indicating that Myanmar does not feel threatened by either China or India, the same official said that its relations with New Delhi are getting "better and better." As evidence, he cited the close collaboration between the two countries to clean up the border areas and border trade. He also pointed out that a series of meetings have taken place involving the two countries' military and civilian officials to normalize relations.

Another factor which played a role for Myanmar in easing tensions with India, and ASEAN, is its economic policy. The SLORC leaders have adopted an open door market policy, and this has made it imperative for the authorities to open up trade with its neighbors. From about Rs. 900 million in 1989-90, the trade between Myanmar and India has reached Rs. 4.43 billion in 1993-94, almost a fivefold jump. There are growing reports that many Indian businesses are showing interest in doing business in Myanmar and six Indian automotive companies have shown keen interest in exporting vehi-

cles to that country.

### **The British dirty hand**

One of the major hindrances to improving relations with Myanmar comes from Britain, which, incidentally, has influenced the international community's views to a large extent.

Myanmar authorities' suspicion about Suu Kyi, whose husband is an academician at Oxford and who had, herself, begun her campaign for democracy right after returning from England, is evident. The change in the Constitution to prevent anyone with a foreign spouse from becoming head of state is clearly designed to keep Suu Kyi out. Nonetheless, the SLORC officials' attitude toward Suu Kyi has taken a change for the better, and there are reports that the regime has recognized Suu Kyi by involving itself in talks with her.

While these developments are taking place to ease tensions, the pitch was queered in Britain in mid-November when the deputy speaker of Britain's House of Lords, Baroness Cox, accused Myanmar authorities of using germ warfare against ethnic Karens who have taken up arms for an independent Karen State. Baroness Cox, who is also a member of Christian Solidarity International (CSI), told the House of Lords that Myanmar authorities are conducting a "charm offensive" and promoting peace while allowing their troops to carry out atrocities.

The atrocities that Baroness Cox was referring to were cited by the CSI in a report which says that the Myanmar Army carried out a campaign of germ warfare to annihilate the Karens. CSI, a London-based human rights organization which mainly helps persecuted Christians, said that during their visit to Myanmar, they were told by Karen representatives that the military had dropped "balloons with white boxes" in places where epidemics resembling cholera or acute dysentery subsequently broke out, causing large-scale death of Karen children.

The British campaign is obviously to keep Myanmar isolated and transform it into a hotspot from which problems can be created in India, China, and Indochina, in particular. With the improvement of Sino-Indian relations and a greater interest in New Delhi's participation in Asian economic development, it is imperative for India to have close relations with Myanmar.

This will help India participate in the trade that will flow through the Chinese-proposed building of the Silk Road, bringing European technology into the most populous area of the world. With good relations with Myanmar, India can open up the old Lido Road and eventually link up with ASEAN through Indochina. It also provides an opportunity for India to link up with the Stilwell Road and connect itself with China. This easterly expansion of trade potential will surely provide an opportunity for India's northeast to improve its lot economically. The policy, if adopted, will also defeat the British plan to create tensions in the region.