



View Point

Has ASEAN's Policy of Engagement with Myanmar Yielded Results?

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A new dawn has set in Myanmar with the government's reconciliatory approach towards domestic and international audiences. It has generated political space for a 'roadmap to discipline-flourishing democracy'. Earlier, it was argued that in Myanmar neither sanctions nor constructive engagement would work. However, taking note of international community's reengagement with Myanmar and ASEAN's decision to let Myanmar chair the organization in 2014, it is prudent to explore whether ASEAN's policy of engagement with Myanmar has yielded results. It is pertinent to mention here that ASEAN had always advocated a policy of engagement with Myanmar, whereas Western powers tried to coerce the military regime into submission by sanctions and isolation.

The lack of democracy in Myanmar along with poverty, illiteracy, 'fear psychosis' against the ruling regime, were major challenges for ASEAN to bring back Myanmar into the international community. When ASEAN invited Myanmar to join the organization in 1997, it was partly based on the premise that Myanmar's integration in ASEAN would enhance ASEAN's influence over the junta more than its isolation. The first serious note of internal situation in Myanmar was taken by ASEAN when Myanmar was scheduled to chair the organization in 2007, on the basis of rotating leadership. ASEAN realized that if Myanmar was allowed to chair the organization, it would tarnish ASEAN's image forever. Therefore, in 2005, ASEAN

members pressured Myanmar to give up its turn for 2007 chairmanship of the organization.

ASEAN also recognized that Myanmar is not only problematic for their international reputation but also a drain on their diplomatic resources and a threat to peace and stability in the region. It forced them to redefine their mandate and apply greater pressure for change in Myanmar. The 'ASEAN Charter for the 21st Century' adopted in January 2006 which champion's democracy promotion and human rights as universal values reflect that change. ASEAN also established a human rights commission against the strong objections of the Myanmarese government.

ASEAN exhibited a striking departure from its traditional policy of non-interference in internal affairs of the member countries when the violent disturbances took place in Myanmar in 2007, in which many people including Buddhist monks were killed. During the ASEAN's Foreign ministers meeting at the UN on 28 September 2007 Myanmarese government's actions were condemned. It was noted that they were appalled by the use of automatic weapons against protestors and called on the Myanmarese government to seek a political solution, and to release political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi.

These efforts by ASEAN bore fruit during cyclone Nargis in 2008, when Myanmarese government though refused assistance from other countries, eventually allowed ASEAN countries to assist. As a result of ASEAN's pressures and its policy of engagement, the Myanmar government drafted a new constitution and asked people for its ratification. Looking at these events, it can be said that though the isolationist policies of western countries have not worked in Myanmar, ASEAN's policy of constructive engagement has yielded results.

Still, there are numerous challenges ahead for Myanmar. The first question which comes to mind is, 'whether the transitional processes are meaningful enough to realise a new dawn in Myanmar', and how things in Myanmar will unfold in the coming days?

The Military (SLORC/SPDC) has been in power for nearly fifty years in Myanmar and apart from exercising raw power, it has expanded its activities in political and economic spheres. The 2008 Constitution provides special privileges and

dominant role to the armed forces (tatmadaw). In this backdrop, is it possible for the military to reconcile itself to a limited role, as is expected of the military in other democratic countries?

The processes of state formations in Myanmar have failed to fully integrate the ethnic social formations, providing excuses for military interventions in the past. In this backdrop, is it possible to have national reconciliation among various ethnic groups?

Myanmar also faces huge economic and developmental challenges. The country lags behind its neighbours on most socio-economic indicators like, poverty, health, education, and so on, with a Human Development Index ranking of 149 out of 187 countries in 2011. Moreover, due to its isolation from International Financial Institutions and regional development banks for so long, reliable and quality data is not available for an objective assessment of socio-economic indicators in Myanmar, which would hamper policy making. There is also a significant illegal economy based on smuggling of drugs, gemstones, timber, etc.

Nevertheless, taking a cue from ASEAN, major countries like the US, EU, India, Japan, have started engaging Myanmar. The US has appointed its first ambassador to the country in more than twenty two years and announced easing of economic sanctions and investment ban on Myanmar. This is significant from Myanmar's perspective, since the US dollar is the world's primary trading currency, and the ban on financial transactions had been a particular hurdle for doing business in Myanmar. Likewise, EU has announced an aid package of about US \$200million for poverty eradication by improving health, education and capacity building in Myanmar. Japan has pledged 600 billion yen (US\$7.5bn) as development assistance over three years to five countries of the Mekong River region i.e. Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Japan's decision to write off, in stages, 300 billion yen of its earlier loans to Myanmar and supply new loans to the country for the first time in 25 years, is significant. India has offered nearly US \$500 million in credit to Myanmar to develop railways, roads and waterways. India is also helping Myanmar in building a port in the coastal city of Sittwe, which will cater to bilateral trade.

The admission of Myanmar in ASEAN in 1997, made India ASEAN's contiguous neighbour, and has given boost to India's 'Look East Policy'. Myanmar has the potential to become major transit route for India's growing trade relations with Southeast Asia, and to develop the Mekong Ganga cooperation (MGC) sub-region. The India-ASEAN co-operation has the potential to facilitate effective economic integration of the ASEAN member states like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, by bridging the developmental gaps with other ASEAN members.

India has enormous stakes in developing good relations with Myanmar from both security and economic perspectives. While the large quantities of unexploited oil and gas reserves of Myanmar can help India in meeting its energy security, cooperation is also critical for developing and maintaining security in the north-east region. For this, the Indian PM visited Myanmar in May 2012 after a gap of nearly a quarter of century.

Myanmar's location in the Bay of Bengal region is also of strategic significance, as US, China, and India, are likely to pay greater attention to this region. This is based on the premise that in recent times U.S. announced to reposition sixty percent of its naval fleet in the Asia-Pacific region by the end of this decade, up from the current level of about fifty percent. This move by the US is likely to enhance Myanmar's and ASEAN's role in the region.

In a nutshell, ASEAN's policy of engagement with Myanmar has opened a window of opportunity for ASEAN, India, and the international community to begin a process of concentrated and coordinated engagement for the benefit of common people in Myanmar and for broader peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

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