



## **View Point**

### **Myanmar-in-Transition Opens more Space for India**

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Myanmar, during the last two years, has undergone many changes of considerable political and strategic significance both for the domestic as well as international audiences. These changes relate to two important aspects – change in the political outlook of the country and change in the dynamic of Myanmar’s engagement with the outside world. Moreover, these changes have been driven primarily by the growing confidence of continuance and consolidation of power within the military leadership and its willingness to engage the outside world.

#### **Change within Myanmar**

The change within Myanmar has occurred in two key areas – change in the outlook of the ruling regime and initiatives including politico-constitutional reforms towards national reconciliation. First, the government of the military regime has been replaced by a civilian-looking regime supported by paraphernalia of political and administrative institutions. The new constitution, adopted in 2008, has changed the name of the country from Union of Myanmar to Republic of the Union of Myanmar governed by a bicameral legislature. The political model of Myanmar, in fact, follows quite closely the Indonesian model of Pancasila Democracy under the authoritarian regime of Suharto with both the elected and military-nominated members. The national government is headed by a President. The government, under the new constitution, has also set up various politico-administrative institutions, such as Union

Election Commission, Union Supreme Court, Financial Commission, Constitutional Tribunal, and Union Civil Services Board, to facilitate administrative and governance matters.

Second, the government, since the elections in 2010, has taken various reform measures in the direction of gradual political relaxations and greater popular participation in the national political processes. The government has released a few hundred political prisoners in different phases, considered by many as a substantial step towards reforms and democratisation. The government released the leader of National League for Democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2010 and has also allowed her to enter into active politics of the country. The NLD decided in November 2011 to re-register itself as a political party and Aung San Suu Kyi has decided to join the political process by contesting the by-election under the NLD platform, scheduled to be held in April 2012. The latest step in the direction of national reconciliation came on 13 January 2012 when the national government announced to release more than 300 political prisoners. The national government has taken steps towards greater accommodation of opposition groups. Moreover, the government has also embarked on entering into ceasefire agreements and peace processes with the ethnic insurgent groups.

A democratising Myanmar offers the Indian government a scope for engagement over wide-ranging issues of governance and institution-building. The democratic India remains the largest and best practicing democracy in its vicinity, possessing decades of experience of managing dissent and diversity. Moreover, a democratising Myanmar bridges the gap between India's normative positions of pro-democracy and its pragmatic approach of constructive engagement with the military leadership. India, despite its engagement with the military-ruled Myanmar, found it difficult to reconcile the domestic support for democratic movements in Myanmar and the strategic imperative of engaging the latter. This reconciliation can allow India to concentrate its resources on developing relations with Naypyidaw. Finally, a democratising Myanmar allows India to tap onto the biggest resource base of engagement – pro-democracy leaders and support groups operating in India. The return of these exiles to their country can further help India strengthen its constituencies within the political leadership of Myanmar.

India can also benefit from the possibility of greater coordination and investment of resources and strategies in combating transnational crimes in India's northeast, such as armed insurgency, trafficking in drugs, arms and human beings, and illegal cross-border migration. Moreover, the positive changes in Myanmar may reduce the flow of illegal cross-border movement of people that has proved to be an important carrier and conduit of cross-border trafficking in arms and drugs and overall instability along the border.

### **Myanmar Comes out of Closet**

The new leadership has shown willingness to engage the wider world and diversify the avenues of its strategic engagement. The normalisation of political processes has further sped up Naypyidaw's global and regional rehabilitation. Leaders from various countries, including important global and regional actors, have visited Naypyidaw during the last six months. They have not only welcomed the change taking place in Myanmar's bodypolitik but also expressed their willingness to lift sanctions, resume aids and assistance, and initiate cooperation over various issues of development and governance. Both the United States and European Union have indicated to lift the sanctions in the wake of reform measures taken under the new leadership of Thein Sein. Moreover, Myanmar will also be taking over as ASEAN Chair in 2014, indicating an important trend towards the country's regional rehabilitation and growing global recognition of the regime, a process that can further stir up more political reforms in the country.

Myanmar's growing engagement with the outside world has two important sub-texts – (a) widening horizon of Myanmar's role as an important factor in the great-power relations, and (b) less pressure on India-Myanmar relations both from the West as well as from China. Myanmar is today regarded as an important variable not only in the Sino-Indian rivalry but also in the Sino-US rivalry. The visit of the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton in January 2012 is understood as the US attempt to break into the Chinese sphere of influence as a part of its larger policy of re-asserting supremacy in Asia. On the other hand, Myanmar has shown gradual detachment from its erstwhile patron – China, indicating its desire to diversify its cooperation with

other powers. In the face of growing domestic opposition, the Myanmar government scrapped the Chinese hydropower project over Myitsone river worth US\$3.6 billion. There is growing resentment within Myanmar's leadership as well as people against the dynamic of Myanmar-China engagement that can be termed as neo-colonial pattern of resource-extraction by the superior player.

Myanmar's decision to engage the wider world allows more space for India to engage the country. While the West is going to be more reconciliatory of India's engagement with Myanmar, China will be less wary of Naypyidaw's engagement with India and more of the growing role of the US in the country. In other words, India can engage Myanmar more freely and widen the arena of engagement including defence and security cooperation.

Nevertheless, the opening up of Myanmar also poses an important challenge to India's engagement with Myanmar. In the presence of other players, India has to be more attentive to Myanmar's concerns and proactive in its policy initiatives for bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Otherwise, India might see the strategic space being taken over by other players both from the West as well as the East.

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