



An Assessment of President Htin Kyaw's Visit to India

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Introduction

The President of Myanmar Htin Kyaw commenced his four-day long visit to India on August 27 at the invitation of President Pranab Mukherjee.

President Htin Kyaw's visit happened in the backdrop of Aung San Suu Kyi's China visit and Myanmar visit of the External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj. It is pertinent to mention here that Aung San Suu Kyi was on a five-day long visit to China, her maiden visit to a non-ASEAN country, from August 17, 2016, where she discussed a range of issues with Chinese leaders including the BCIM corridor, One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, and the Myitsone dam issue.

With the visit of President Htin Kyaw, Myanmar has demonstrated that it gives equal importance, if not more, to India in comparison to China. Notably, after Aung San Suu Kyi's China visit, the local Chinese media had vociferously commented that Myanmar prefers China over India. Htin Kyaw's visit puts such speculations to rest. It may be noted that Aung San Suu Kyi is likely to visit India soon to participate in the BRICS-BIMSTEC Summit.

Significance of the Visit

During his visit, President Htin Kyaw met President Pranab Mukherjee, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj. A range of issues including border management and security, and bilateral trade figured in their discussions. A high-level delegation which included the minister of state for foreign affairs, the union minister for religious affairs and culture, the union minister for labour, immigration and manpower, the union minister for transportation and

communication, and other high-ranking officials also participated in the bilateral meetings.

The President of Myanmar extended an invitation to the Prime Minister and the President of India, respectively to visit Myanmar at mutually convenient dates; the invitations were accepted by the Indian side.

During President Htin Kyaw's visit four Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) were signed on August 29, 2016.

1. MoU on Cooperation in the construction of 69 bridges including AP Approach Roads in the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa Road Section of the Trilateral Highway in Myanmar.
2. MoU on Cooperation in the construction/upgradation of the Kalewa-Yagyi Road Section.
3. MoU on Cooperation in the field of Renewable Energy.
4. MoU on Cooperation in the field of Traditional Systems of Medicine.

Myanmar has undergone drastic changes on the domestic front after the general elections were held in November 2015 in which Aung San Suu Kyi and Htin Kyaw's National League for Democracy emerged victorious and formed the government in March 2016. The Indian leadership assured President Htin Kyaw of India's support to the democratic transition and institution building in Myanmar's nascent democratic system. India has also expressed support to the nation-wide ethnic reconciliation process, termed as the 21st Century Panglong Conference. India is mindful of the fact that ethnic peace and harmony in Myanmar is essential for peace and stability in India's own northeastern states, which have ethnic linkages with bordering provinces of Myanmar.

India-Myanmar: Areas of Cooperation

Myanmar is not only crucial for the peace and stability in the northeastern states of India but also plays a significant role in ensuring peace and stability along the 1,643-km long India-Myanmar border. India's recent hot pursuits against insurgents along the border have once again proved Myanmar's salience in India's national security, and its fight against the insurgent, separatist and terrorist elements.

Myanmar is India's gateway to Southeast Asia. To realise the long-cherished goal of connecting with the Southeast Asian countries, India has taken up several infrastructural and connectivity initiatives. This includes the Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project, an ambitious project that aims to link India and Myanmar in trade, energy and connectivity. During the visit of President Htin Kyaw, the two sides agreed to commence the completed facilities at Sittwe and Paletwa by December 2016.

The two sides also consented on the point that there should be expeditious discussions to finalise the modalities of their operation and maintenance.

In order to boost bilateral border trade, India and Myanmar agreed to do away with the barter system in December 2015 along the Moreh-Tamu border. While, according to the reports, the border trade volume has gone down, it will take some time before the traders along the India-Myanmar border get accustomed to the formal trade. Setting up the immigration facilities at the Tamu-Moreh and Rhi-Zowkhathar border crossing points also figured in the deliberations.

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project is another important project with a potential to have far-reaching consequences for India's connectivity plans with the Southeast Asian region and beyond. As a friendship gesture, India has made efforts to supply power to Myanmar. One such step is the supply of power from India across the Moreh-Tamu border on April 8, 2016. According to the Ministry of External Affairs press release, issued after Htin Kyaw's meeting with Prime Minister Modi, the Indian and Myanmar leaders have also resolved that the proposed MoU between India and Myanmar on Cooperation in the field of Power should be negotiated at the earliest.

India has been helping Myanmar in the restoration of the famous Ananda Temple in Bagan, Myanmar. India's Archaeological Survey of India is actively involved in the process of conservation and restoration of the temple. According to the Ministry of External Affairs' report, the "Indian side confirmed that a project to preserve and conserve stone inscriptions and temples of King Mindon and King Bagyidaw of Myanmar in Bodh Gaya would be undertaken by the Archaeological Survey of India with financial support from the Government of India. The two sides also agreed on joint technical support for preservation and conservation of the two stone inscriptions." Myanmar, which in recent times has been struck by a series of earthquakes, needs India's support in upkeep of the sites of historical importance. India's support on that count will not only strengthen its soft power in Myanmar, but would also help in building people-to-people contacts.

India has been playing a proactive role in the developmental activities in Myanmar. India's technical and financial assistance to the Myanmar government in that regard is of special significance. Government of India has been helping Myanmar in areas such as agriculture, education and health infrastructure, information technology and IT training, industrial training, and connectivity.

India has been playing a key role in the human development issues in Myanmar. On that count, India's technical and financial assistance in upgradation of the Yangon Children's Hospital and the Sittwe General Hospital has been a remarkable step.

India's support to institutes such as Advanced Centre for Agricultural Research and Education (ACARE), Myanmar Institute of Information Technology (MIIT), and Rice

Bio-Park at Yezin University in Nay Pyi Taw, India-Myanmar Centre for the Enhancement of IT Skills (IMCEITS) in Yangon, Language Laboratories in both Nay Pyi Taw and Yangon, e-Resource Centre at Nay Pyi Taw, computerisation of the Central Land Records Development Training Centre (CLRDTTC) at Taik Kyi in Yangon region has been well appreciated by the Myanmar authorities and people alike.

Conclusion

Successful as it was, the visit of the President of Myanmar injected an element of vigour in India-Myanmar ties, which was further strengthened with the meeting between Prime Minister Modi and Myanmar's Foreign Minister and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit in Vientiane, Laos in September. More interactions and dialogues, which would hopefully lead to greater understanding, are expected during Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to India in October as also the visits of Prime Minister Modi and President Pranab Mukherjee to Myanmar in future.

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