

Opening Statement

by



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at

Seminar on

‘Change in Myanmar: Impact on India-Myanmar Relations’

at

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It is both a privilege and pleasure for me to address this distinguished audience at the inaugural session of a very important seminar, a first of its kind. This event reflects a new bond of cooperation between the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS) and the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), resulting from the MoU that they signed during the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Myanmar in May 2012. It is also an important moment in the quest for deeper understanding and stronger friendship between Myanmar and India.

2. As you would know, ICWA is the oldest and a premier foreign policy think tank of India. It has a sizeable number of in-house experts; it also enjoys easy access to vast resources of the large strategic and academic community of our country. This explains why we are privileged to have in our delegation well-known Myanmar scholars from the Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA) - another MoU partner of MISIS, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) and Delhi University, besides ICWA. I am particularly delighted that Ambassador Shyam Saran, former foreign secretary, former special envoy of Prime Minister, former ambassador to Myanmar—like me, and the present Chairman of RIS, has come with us. Clearly the visit of ICWA-sponsored delegation demonstrates the commitment of India's leading Track II institutions to further study, research, and disseminate accurate knowledge about 'the new Myanmar' in the backdrop of historic internal developments as well as important recent trends in the bilateral, regional and international context.

3. We are immensely pleased to be at this event hosted by MISIS, an institution for which we have much respect and appreciation. Its Chairman, Ambassador Nyunt Maung Shein, visited India last month to participate in Delhi Dialogue V, our flagship conference on India-ASEAN relations. Earlier, ICWA had also the privilege to host a lecture by HE U Wunna Maung Lwin, Foreign Minister of Myanmar, in January 2012. We look forward to further expansion of academic and strategic expert-level contacts in future. This, I believe, would be highly desirable in order to achieve our shared objective of deepening and strengthening India-Myanmar relations.

4. When in June 2011 I last visited this favourite country of ours—‘the Golden Land’, it was at the invitation of MISIS which had co-hosted, with German Foundation FES, an international seminar entitled ‘Myanmar and the International Community—the Way Forward.’ You would recall that this was a critical stage in the evolution of reform process: President Thein Sein had announced his reform agenda through his 30 March inaugural speech before the Parliament, but the reconciliation between the Government and NLD was yet to happen. (It followed after the meeting between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the President in August 2011.) On return from the Yangon seminar, I wrote in an Op-ed of a prestigious national daily:

‘I returned with a clear impression that Myanmar is passing through a complex transition: the old era of the State Peace and Development Council rule has ended and the new era of ‘civilian’ rule, with all its imperfections, has begun.’

5. In the past two years, the Government’s reform caravan has performed an impressive journey, securing one achievement after another: operationalisation, after November 2010 elections, of the new Parliament and other democratic institutions established under the 2008 Constitution; release of political prisoners and normalisation of political life; granting of a variety of freedoms to labour, media and civil society; and undertaking of an ambitious programme of economic liberalisation and development. As a result, the country’s political and socio-economic landscape has changed substantially. Recognition of this change by Myanmar’s international partners has been swift, substantial and somewhat competitive in nature.

6. However, in spite of these positive trends, Myanmar people - their leaders, spokesmen and experts – themselves point out that the country’s journey has just begun. Challenges such as the ethnic conflict and the imperative need to resolve it through sustained reconciliation, strife in the Rakhine state, constitutional reform, a whole range of governance issues, and the national goal of securing accelerated economic growth, confront the nation.

7. Managing foreign policy in a fast transforming environment, while taking into consideration complex geo-political developments, may be considered as another challenge. In a recent speech, new US Secretary of State John Kerry stated: ‘There is no longer anything foreign

about foreign policy.’ He added: ‘More than ever before, the decisions that we make from the safety of our shores do not just ripple outward; they also create a current right here in America.’ I would only stress these wise words are applicable to Myanmar and India as much as they apply to the US.

8. We look forward to benefiting from the Myanmar side’s informed perceptions in order to refine our understanding of various aspects of Myanmar’s reform strategy and foreign policy. It goes without saying that, as a reciprocal gesture, my delegation would be willing to assist you to comprehend and appreciate any aspect of the Indian polity and our public policy.

9. The other significant objective of this seminar will undoubtedly be an in-depth examination and appraisal of India’s multi-faceted relationship with Myanmar. This will be undertaken against the larger historical backdrop, even as we may focus on assessing developments in the past two years. It seems to us that the period that started with President Thein Sein’s visit to India in October 2011, witnessed the landmark visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in May 2012, and ended with the visit to Myanmar of the Speaker of Lok Sabha in February 2013, may be considered as one of the most productive and positive phases in the development of our bilateral relations. Clearly the change in Myanmar, flowing from the emergence of a new national consensus and reconciliation, has had beneficial impact on India-Myanmar relations.

10. While examining new trends in our relationship and its regional dimensions, I wish to make a special mention of the Vision Statement issued at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit of December 2012. Especially two of its provisions are relevant, namely (i) ASEAN’s appreciation of ‘India’s commitment to continue the special focus on the CLMV countries that represent a bridge between ASEAN and India’ through human resource development and capacity building; and (ii) the joint commitment to enhancing connectivity through various measures.

11. What has been the effect of new bilateral Agreements, particularly those concluded during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s visit to Myanmar as well as before and after that

visit? Are there still constraints and impediments on the path of further development of relations? What can we do differently? What other areas need exploration? Can we suggest new measures and ideas to policy makers? I am sure that we would not simply be reviewing past developments, but we will strive to draw fresh conclusions and craft creative recommendations for future. I see this as a special event which has gathered together some of the top experts on India-Myanmar relations today. Our people and institutions have expectations that we must do our utmost to fulfil.

12. In short, we may choose to be critical but objective. We shall review the past and evaluate the present, but we should be futuristic too. The central challenge for us will be to work together as scholars and, if possible, produce a set of joint recommendations, with the aim to take this vital relationship to the next higher level, maybe even to a new strategic partnership.

I thank you all for your attention.
