



India and Myanmar: Choices for Military Cooperation

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The political transition towards a democratic system in Myanmar has acted as a catalyst and provided an opportunity for India to engage its neighbour more intimately. In the recent past, there have been several high level engagements between the political leadership of the two countries; the Indian Prime Minister visited Naypyidaw in April 2012 after a hiatus of nearly 25 years. Both sides exude a new found confidence in their relationship and have agreed to enhance trade to US\$ 3.0 billion by 2015.¹ India has promised US\$ 500 million line of credit to Myanmar and also agreed to develop livelihood opportunities in border areas and assist in setting up IT infrastructure. Both sides have also agreed to establish network among educational institutions such as universities and think tanks.

In the defence and security domain India and Myanmar have acknowledged the need to establish robust security mechanisms for land borders to address the ongoing insurgencies and prevent instability in contiguous areas. In the past, India has supported Myanmar's defence forces through capacity building and has supplied some military hardware. There are plans to train Myanmar military personnel too. As a maritime neighbour, the Myanmar Navy has participated in multilateral maritime forums such as Milan. These initiatives are significant keeping in mind that India was under enormous pressure to isolate Myanmar at a time when the western world led by the US and several EU countries had imposed a number of sanctions.

In the above context, this paper attempts to identify the drivers for the bilateral security and defence cooperation and also to understand the geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics that are at play in their relations.

Insurgency in North East

One of the important drivers for India to engage Myanmar is the issue of insurgency in its North East. India has a long border with Myanmar which runs for nearly 1643 kilometers alongside the states of Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. The ongoing insurgency in the region is not new and has been in existence since the early years of Indian independence. Interestingly, as early as 1950, India had supplied six Dakota aircraft to Myanmar to fight rebels.²

Currently, there are at least eight insurgent or militant groups / outfits in the area which have been operating from the Indian and Myanmar territory.³ It is believed that these groups have received financial, logistic and military support allegedly from external sources in South Asia and also from Southeast Asia. They have established sanctuaries / safe heavens with the connivance of sympathetic groups and communities in the neighborhood. The Indian security forces have conducted counter insurgency operations but the insurgents have managed to escape to neighboring areas where the law enforcement agencies are either weak or disinterested.

However, there have been attempts in the past to flush out these insurgents from Myanmar. For instance in November 1991, the Myanmar military conducted raids against Manipuri rebel bases and arrested 192 insurgents including UNLF chief Rajkumar Meghen.⁴ Apparently, the latter was released by the Myanmar authorities. In 1994, India and Myanmar signed a MoU for the 'maintenance of peace and tranquility in border areas'.⁵ This served as a useful instrument to launch Operation Golden Bird in 1995, a joint operations to intercept a huge consignment of arms being transported by insurgent groups from Cox Bazar in Bangladesh to Manipur. The operation came under diplomatic cloud after the military authorities learnt that India had decided to award the 'Nehru Award for International Understanding' to Aung San Suu Kyi.⁶

India and Myanmar have been holding regular border liaison meetings and during the 46th meeting held in August 2012, Myanmar and India discussed several measures along the border aimed at pushing the insurgents out of the Myanmar's territory.⁷ It was also informed that the Indian security forces had stepped up the vigil in districts in the tribal-dominated areas.

Drug Smuggling

Myanmar has been identified as a major source of poppy cultivation (spread over nearly 43,600 hectares) in Asia and there are several processing units spread in the thick jungles in the north of the country. Although the Myanmar government has taken initiatives to curb poppy cultivation and production, the illicit trade continues.⁸ Ironically for India, the constants of geography and the location of the two primary sources of illicit opium in Asia i.e. the Golden Crescent comprising of Afghanistan and Pakistan and the Golden Triangle formed by Myanmar, Thailand and Laos, have resulted in it turning into a transit country for processed narcotics. India has also become a source of precursor chemicals such as acetic anhydride (AA), ephedrine, and pseudoephedrine which are used for processing opium.⁹

India and Myanmar have devised a strategy to counter drug smuggling and the issue is discussed at the highest level. Early this year, during the annual Home Secretary-level meeting at Naypyidaw, the two sides agreed to initiate necessary steps to prevent smuggling of drugs, arms and ammunition.¹⁰ In 2010, the two sides had agreed to the Ratification of Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty on Criminal Matters (MLAT) and this legal arrangement is a useful instrument to address a number of transnational crimes including insurgency, drug smuggling and gun running taking place across the borders of the two countries.¹¹

Defence Capacity Building

Defence cooperation between India and Myanmar is an important facet of bilateral relations. Indian Military chiefs have visited Myanmar in the past and exchanged views on issues of mutual interest. The Indian Navy appears to have been quite proactive and Indian naval chiefs have visited Myanmar. There have also been regular port calls by Indian naval ships to Myanmar ports. As far as naval hardware is concerned, in 2006, India announced transfer of two BN-2 'Defender' Islander maritime surveillance aircraft and deck-based air-defence guns to the Myanmar Navy.¹² There were plans to help Myanmar establish a naval aviation training centre in Myanmar. It will be pertinent to mention that the decision to supply the aircraft had invited sharp reactions from the UK which is the original supplier of BN-2 'Defender' Islander to India. The UK had warned that it would stop supply of 'spare parts and maintenance support for them as it opposed the country's military administration.'¹³ Further, Myanmar Navy has regularly participated in the Milan meetings held at Port Blair in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands in the

Bay of Bengal. During these events, Myanmar is represented either by a senior naval officer or a naval delegation or on occasions by a naval ship.¹⁴

Military training too has been an agenda of bilateral defence cooperation. In 2006, the Indian Army had offered special warfare training for Myanmar soldiers.¹⁵ In a significant move, during the visit of General Min Aung Hlaing, Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services of Myanmar, to India in August 2012, India once again offered to train Myanmar Army personnel.

As far as other military hardware is concerned, the Indian Army transferred a few light artillery guns and Armoured Personal Carriers (APC).¹⁶ In 2007, there were reports that India had offered the indigenously designed Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH); but these were denied by the government since the helicopter has a number of EU origin components and any sale would defy the contractual obligations as also EU sanctions against Myanmar.¹⁷ The India Air Force chief during a visit to Naypyidaw in 2006 had offered his Myanmar counterpart generous air force support in upgrading avionics of fighter aircraft in Myanmar's inventory.¹⁸

Maritime Security

India and Myanmar face a number of maritime security challenges in the Bay of Bengal. These are essentially nontraditional security (NTS) issues and emerge in the form piracy, terrorism, gun running, drug smuggling, illegal fishing, and human smuggling. The Indian Prime Minister also highlighted the issue during his recent visit to Myanmar in April 2012 and observed that both India and Myanmar need to “expand our security cooperation that is vital not only to maintain peace along our land borders but also to protect maritime trade which we hope will open up through the sea route between Kolkata and Sittwe.”¹⁹ At another level, NTS challenges also include issues relating to climate change and marine environment and the navies / maritime forces have been at the forefront to respond to climate change related disasters providing rescue and relief.

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)

The Bay of Bengal is replete with weather and natural events and the region has been hit by cyclones and Tsunami. In recent times, Myanmar was hit by the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and Cyclone Nargis in 2008 which left 78,000 people dead/missing and affected 2.4 million others.²⁰ Emergency humanitarian assistance was offered by the navies from a number of countries

including the US, Britain and France but their warships were refused ship-to-shore operations.²¹ However, two Indian warships entered port to deliver relief materials under operation code named Operation Sahayata.²²

At the operational level, the regional capacity to respond to climate change induced disasters is quite limited. The Indian Navy's capacity to respond to HADR is quite substantive and has been showcased during the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Since that event, the Indian Navy has acquired a number of naval platforms that are tailored to respond to various HADR mission and roles. However, Myanmar's capability to respond to these weather events is quite low and would require assistance from India.

Oil Infrastructure and Environment Protection

Myanmar is rich in offshore oil and gas reserves and it is estimated that it could be holding nearly 300 bcm of gas. A number of energy companies from China, France, India and South Korea are actively engaged in exploration activities. These mega offshore energy projects also need to be viewed from the environmental security matrix. These emerge in the form of pollution by the enhanced shipping traffic and the chances of accidents resulting in oil spills which can potentially impact on the fragile ecosystem in the Bay of Bengal. It is useful to mention that the UN has identified the Bay of Bengal as a Large Marine Ecosystem (LME) which is an environmentally sensitive sea space. Further, these offshore platforms have relatively few security systems and are vulnerable to sabotage. It will be useful to establish 'hot lines' between the maritime enforcement agencies of the two countries to respond to environmental crisis so that requisite response capabilities can be mobilized.

Illegal migration

The impact of climate change is most noticeable in the Bay of Bengal. There are fears that large tracts of Bangladesh's coastline may be inundated, coastal areas could be contaminated by sea water which would adversely impact on agriculture. Such a situation would result in social chaos forcing people to move to other places to seek livelihood. A 2008 report by the National Defence University, Washington concluded that climate change induced events could result in thousands of Bangladeshi refugees entering India and it is plausible that some could enter Myanmar illegally through the sea routes. In the past, India maritime security agencies had intercepted a

large number of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar who reached the A&N coast after they were intercepted by the Thai military and later set adrift.²³

Geopolitical and Geostrategic Considerations

In recent times, Indian policy makers have begun to position Myanmar prominently in the Look East Policy framework. The Indian Prime Minister has unequivocally stated that Myanmar holds a significant place both in India's Look East Policy and in its collaboration with ASEAN countries under the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI).²⁴ Besides Myanmar is an important partner of India in the BIMSTEC and an important node in the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) initiative.

Myanmar's geographic location serves as a land bridge for India to engage with mainland Southeast Asia. It can facilitate and foster economic growth of India's North East region that has remained underdeveloped due to limited connectivity and absence of investments and industrial growth. It is generally agreed that the root cause of the insurgency in India's North East has been poor state of socio-economic development in the region resulting in a sense of alienation among the people who have taken to insurgency. In the above context, the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) Cooperation Forum or the Kunming Initiative, a sub-regional grouping, can provide for a Kunming-Mandalay-Dhaka-Kolkata economic zone that can potentially contribute to regional economic integration.²⁵

At the strategic level, the tone and tenor of articulations by the Indian strategic community has moved away from labeling Myanmar as a 'satellite of China' and the fears of the Chinese operated electronic surveillance systems in Myanmar appear to have reduced significantly. Apparently, Myanmar had offered to India an access to the often cited surveillance facility at the Coco islands.²⁶

However, there are concerns that China's military assistance to Myanmar is continuing. It is true that China can offer better military aid package compared to India and therefore it is fair to argue that India need not appease the ruling government with military sops; instead India could explore the possibility of engaging Myanmar in the maritime domain and develop a robust agenda including capacity building to address nontraditional security threats and challenges in the Bay of Bengal. Besides, India is an active participant in the ADMM Plus (ASEAN Defence

Ministers Meetings Plus) whose five working groups address NTS issues thus offering the two partners a substantive agenda for bilateral maritime security cooperation.

It is worth mentioning that Myanmar's parliament recently announced the nomination of Admiral Nyan Tun as one of the Vice President of the country. It is believed that the Admiral has the reputation as a political moderate²⁷ and had visited India in 2010.²⁸

Concluding Remarks

Myanmar is an important neighbour and it is in New Delhi's interest that a strong and stable Myanmar emerges in the 21st century. There are visible signs of synergy between India and Myanmar to address issues of common concern. Myanmar's assurance to support India in counter insurgency is a reflection of mutual trust and the growing understanding between the two countries. This provides the basis for institutionalized mechanism for sharing intelligence and strengthening of border management systems.

The Bay of Bengal region offers enormous opportunities for greater engagement between India and Myanmar. Among these, cooperation and technological capacity building for HADR operation, search and rescue of fishermen and coordinated patrolling of respective EEZ is critical.

At another level, it remains to be seen how the military establishment in Myanmar responds to India's positive overture. Myanmar is conscious of the rising profile of China and India and these countries naturally appear in its strategic calculus. It would not like a foreign policy predicament where it has to choose between the two Asian giants. It is cognizant of the Indian naval capability and the military infrastructure being developed in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and would be apprehensive of offering base facilities to the Chinese Navy turning the otherwise placid and calm waters of the Bay of Bengal into a playground of naval competition. Myanmar can be expected to maintain 'strict neutrality' and engage both India and China and focus on economic development.

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- ² Nalini Kant Jha and Gaurav Kumar Jha, “India Myanmar Relations: Balancing Morality, Military and Market”, *World Focus*, June 2012, p.55.
- ³ “Will India-Burma Cooperation Neutralise Northeast Militants?”, *The Asian Age*, August 29, 2012. Also see “NE Insurgent Groups Using Myanmar as Safe Sanctuary: Govt”, *DNA*, August 28, 2012. These groups are the Manipur based People's Liberation Army (PLA), United National Liberation Front (ULFA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak, and Naga insurgent group like NSCN-K and NDFB.
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- ¹⁴ Discussions with retired Indian Navy officers at New Delhi.
- ¹⁵ Brian McCartan “India, Myanmar: Reluctant Brothers in Arms”, *Asia Times*, February 19, 2010.
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- ¹⁹ “PM’s Address to the Think-tanks, Intellectuals and Business Community in Yangon”, http://pmindia.nic.in/content_print.php?nodeid=1180&nodetype=2 [Accessed on September 2, 2012]
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