

# Impact of Myanmar's Militarised Democracy on Indo-Myanmar Relations

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**Abstract:** The paper examines the ties India-Myanmar relationship has witnessed as an impact of Myanmar's Militarised Democracy. Seeing the forays being made by China in Myanmar, India adopted its famous 'Look East Policy' in early nineties. The next few years saw a number of visits by high dignitaries from India and Myanmar exchanged visits. India whilst still supportive of the pro-democracy movement, began to actively engage with the military junta and tried to revive the old ties. Myanmar needs proper political, economic and social development so that the country can move in the right direction. These steps have been welcomed by the democratic neighbour India and also the western countries. What is needed today, is that instead of militarised democracy, full fledged democracy is necessary as seen in the western countries and India.

**Keywords:** Myanmar political scenario, India-Myanmar relations, Myanmar's Democracy, India's National Security, Security threats, External Security.

## I. INTRODUCTION:

India and Myanmar are known for sharing the border of 1640 kilometres as well as for strong historical and cultural ties. Under the British rule India and Myanmar were one nation till as late as 1928. Both the nations shared similar issues during the British rule and both were assiduously struggling for their independence from colonialism. Both the nations got independence around the same time, India in 1947 and Myanmar in Jan 1948. Both the nations were left with a democratic government and with a constitution. However, in Myanmar the democratic institutions was short lived because of a military takeover of power in 1962. Today almost after 5 decades of military rule there is a seething angst against such a system. Ever since it's independence, Myanmar continued to dither from democracy and stayed in clutches of military rule. This was a period when the chaotic situations were created by government, unrest and human rights abuses were at its peak. It's should be mentioned that out of six decades of independence for almost two decades the country virtually had no constitution and governance was by a decree. This condition of the country led the ethnic groups who were denied the basic rights of self-determination to pick up an armed struggle and to get indulged in skirmishes with the ruling army. These conflicts grew in size slow and steady and got people's support for their cause and developed their own regional armies. This development was immensely responsible for the social, political and economic infrastructure of Myanmar's society.<sup>1</sup>

## II. ETHNIC PROFILE:

Development on the social front was totally lacking due to the almost a dictatorial form of governance. There is about 68% of Burman population who traditionally dominate the central lowlands of Myanmar. The remaining population is divided between numerous ethnic groups and subgroups most of

which are concentrated in separate areas in the country's highland periphery. The most important of these groups are Shan(9 % of population), Karen(7%), Karenni(.75%), Rakhine(3.5%)<sup>2</sup>, Chin(2.5), Mon(2%), Kachin(1.5%), Wa(0.16%), Rohingya(0.15%). Before the Britishers left Myanmar, The Panglong Agreement was reached between the Burmese government under Gen Aung San and the representatives of Shan, Kachin, and Chin peoples on 12 February 1947. The Panglong Agreement accepted the principle of "Full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier Areas" and also envisioned the creation of a Kachin State by the Constituent Assembly.<sup>2</sup>

The eve of Myanmar independence in 1948 was immediately followed by assassination of Aung San and the leadership of the country fell on Aung's Deputy U Nu. U Nu had a popular Government but soon was faced by a tough resistance against communist rebels. Lot of uprisings and ethnic conflicts were seen in various provinces of Burma. The Karens who were led predominantly by the Christian Karen National Union (KNU) began fighting for an autonomous state of Karen. When Buddhism was declared the official religion the situation worsened, and questions regarding the rights of the Muslim Rohingya, **Christian Karen**, Chin, Kachin and other peoples under federalism were never really addressed. U Nu asked the Military to form a transitional government from 1958 to 1960 in a reaction to the split of the party in power, in order to conduct fresh elections. After the Elections, in 1962 Burmese coup d'état brought Gen Ne Win to power for the next 26 years. And the insurgency was further intensified.

And this resulted into a number of new insurgent groups and the country was smitten with armed conflicts. The protection of their individual languages, customs, culture and natural resources was regarded important to their national identity by each of the ethnic groups. At the same time, the government forces continued to use their might to suppress one third of the population because they believed that a "crisis of the minorities" could undermine the country's stability.

### III. OPERATIONS OF MAIN ARMS GROUP IN MYANMAR:

Just one year after independence, by 1949 the hilly peripheral area where the ethnic population lived started facing a number of serious insurgencies. Most of the ethnic groups had formed their political parties and their military wings started emerging which targeted the government armed forces. Many ethnic groups took up arms to protect their states from Burman rule, demanding autonomy, ethnic rights and an inclusive democracy. Initially the country's armed forces were weak and divided but soon they built up the strength to tackle the widespread unrest in the country.

As soon as the British left Myanmar<sup>1</sup> the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) took up arms in 1949. The KNLA is the military wing of the Karen National Union (KNU). The Kachin rebels formed the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the military wing of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). The Karenni Army (KA) was created after the Burmese government incorporated Kayah State into the Union of Burma in 1951. Karenni leaders argued they had not agreed to incorporation. The KA is the military wing for the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP). Several Chin opposition groups formed a coalition to push for greater autonomy which led to the formation of The Chin National Front (CNF) in March 1988. The New State Mon Party (NSMP) established an armed wing that has been fighting the government since 1949, whenever military forces entered Mon territory. The Arakan Liberation Army (ALA) was first set up with the help of the KNU in the 1950s but soon became defunct after most of its leaders were arrested. In the 1970s it reassembled, but is still one of the smallest ethnic armies. The Shan State Army (SSA) was formed in 1964 as Burmese military began to move into Shan State. The SSA later split into two factions, creating the Shan State Army-North, which signed a ceasefire with the government in 1964, and the Shan State Army-South, which continued to fight the state until an initial ceasefire in December 2011. The United Wa State Army (USWA), is one of the country's most powerful ethnic armies and receives military resources, infrastructure and support from neighbouring China<sup>3</sup>. It was created after the fall of the Community Party Burma in 1989,.

#### IV. POLITICAL DILEMMA:

The Britishers left the country under a weak democratic rule, since then Myanmar's tryst with democracy since its independence has been extremely fragile. Despite uncontrolled civil wars, insurgency, corruption and mismanagement somehow the constitutional government managed to stay in power till 1962. Thereafter the armed forces staged a coup, who had already experienced the political power for 18 months during elections, arrested many members of the government, suspended the constitution, and ruled by decree. From 1962 onwards for the next twenty years, Myanmar was under a one-party rule (BSPP) under General Ne Win.

There was an economic crisis after Gen Ne Win's withdrew from politics which provoked popular unrest<sup>3</sup>. This was the period when Myanmar witnessed negligible growth and increase in unemployment. And finally in the summer of 1988, the people of Myanmar revolted against the ruling military government. This development is what is sometimes called the "8888 Uprising." The name refers to the tragic events of August 8, 1988, in which soldiers opened fire on the civilian protesters, killing an unknown number of people and started a brutal crackdown on opposition groups and their leaders. A multiparty democratic general elections were promised to the people of Myanmar by the 19-member State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) which came to power on September 18, 1988. This promise was welcomed by people of Myanmar and by the world-watchers. The elections finally took place in 1990 and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi won absolute majorities of votes and seats. The results of the election were refused by the SLORC, and instead it continued its repressive rule, held Ms Suu Kyi under house arrest and suppressed the democratic aspirations of the people<sup>4</sup>.

#### V. WORLD POWERS SHUN MYANMAR:

The darkest period of the country's history has been the era post-1990 era, This period has witnessed the cases of Human Rights violations. Once the outer world was sure of the future of Myanmar that the people of Myanmar will be deprived of their democratic rights the military rule would stay for many more years to come. A number of countries (EU, USA and Canada) slammed economic and cultural sanctions. Before the sanctions were applied, the USA had financed USD 4.7 million in military sales. The Myanmar now needed new military hardware to keep the rebellion suppressed then the China was willing to be a strategic partner. It provided them the supplies of arms as large as amounting to USD1.4 billion in 1989 followed by another deal of USD 400 million in 1994<sup>1</sup> which proved to be a shot in the arm for the waning military prowess of *Tatmadaw*. In 1997 the SLORC was replaced by a State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but this did not change the representation in the senior leadership nor in the well known repressive nature of regime. And then a fresh Constitution was formed under this Military rule which provided for the tremendous powers in the hands of military. As per the new constitution only 75% of the seats for the parliament were contested, rest 25% were nominated by the Commander-in-Chief of the *Tatmadaw*<sup>5</sup>.

#### VI. THE REGIME UNDER *TATMADAW*:

The *Tatmadaw* at the time of Myanmar's independence in 1948 was weak, small and disunited but with passage of time it has become a force to reckon with. It has bagged in a lot of success like influencing the political development and has also been able to keep the growing unrest of the ethnic rebels under check. China and Russia assisted major modernization plan for *tatmadaw*. The *tatmadaw* grew in stature and might in the nineties<sup>6</sup>. Soon it was able to tighten an iron fist towards all the ethnic groups. In the period when the regional ethnic groups started rising, the military *junta* came with a proposal that the groups which accept the cease-fire will be converted into "border guards". But the most of the ethnic armies



opposed this proposal. At this juncture the *Tatmadaw* displayed its might and routed the Kokang Rebel Army in 2009.

Today *Tatmadaw* is strong enough to embed it well in the political stage of the country and is also effectively engaged in tackling its internal and external frontiers, Today it stands with a strength of 3,50,000. Union of Myanmar is always finding itself in trouble being sandwiched between the strategic interests of almost a super power China in the north and a South-Asian power India in the west. There have been reports that China is helping Myanmar with development of its Military Bases at Coco Islands at Myanmar's southern which are just about 20 kilometres from the nearest islands of Andaman group of islands(India). Unconfirmed reports state that the China is developing a Communication Base on one of the three islands in order to keep the Indian ocean region under effective surveillance which is a matter of serious concern for India<sup>6</sup> and its strategy to check China's intentions would involve Myanmar.

## VII. TRANSITION FROM MILITARY TO MILITARISED DEMOCRACY

The country's already failing economy was brought down to an abysmally low level after two decades of Military rule coupled with widespread sanctions from economic giants like USA, Canada and EU. The economy was in grave need of investment in vital sectors like heavy industry, health, Banking, communication and also needed loans for its internal infrastructure development. For this purpose establishment of democracy and conducive environment was a pre-requisite. Probably realising this the country saw formation of its third constitution in 2008. This Constitution epitomised Militarised Democracy, as tremendous participation to military representatives was provided. Elections were held in the country in 2010 as per the new constitution of 2008. Though a number of opposition parties(including the main opposition party, NLD led by Aung Sang Suu Kyi) boycotted the elections, yet the military junta conducted the elections without allowing the international media and formed a government. Some reforms and much required sustainable development measures<sup>8</sup> were initiated by them. Ultimately, the by-elections of 2012 saw a larger participation of political parties and their better representation in the *PyithuHlutaw*( lower house of parliament) including noble laureate Aung San Suu Kyi . President Thein Sein showed resilience in accepting to introduce some serious reforms like removal of press censorship, releasing of political prisoners. This change was welcomed by India and rest of the world and hence world started to re-engage Myanmar.

## VIII. THE ROAD AHEAD :

, India adopted its famous 'Look East Policy' in early nineties after seeing the forays being made by China in Myanmar. The next few years witnessed a number of visits exchanged by the high dignitaries from India and Myanmar. India whilst still supportive of the pro-democracy movement, began to actively engage with the military junta and tried to revive the old ties. Shyam Saran, the former Indian Ambassador to Myanmar in 1997 commented that, "the relations were still frigid". A high-powered delegation including Deputy Prime Minister Lt. Gen. Tin Hla along with a team ministers made a visit to New Delhi brought by Gen Maung Aye, the second-most prominent leader of Myanmar's military junta, in November 2000,. The then India's Home Minister, L.K. Advani, tried to break the frigidity and talked about warming up of ties between the two countries. This visit was followed by a six day visit of Gen Than Shwe to New Delhi in 2004 and in 2006 President Abdul Kalam visit to Yangon. A number of bilateral treaties were signed relating from sharing of cultural ,social to technology and military cooperation in these ongoing visits by the two countries. Subsequent years witnessed the Government of India active involvement in over a dozen projects in Myanmar, both in infrastructural and non-infrastructural areas. These operations included upgradation and resurfacing of the 160 km. long Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyoroad; construction and upgradation of

the Rhi-Tiddim Road in Myanmar; the Mega Rs 1500 Crore Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project, which was going to link the north-eastern states via the Bay of Bengal and Myanmar route<sup>7</sup>. An ADSL project for high speed data link in 32 Myanmar cities has been completed by TCIL, ONGC, GAIL and ESSAR are participants in the energy sector in Myanmar. M/s RITES is involved in development of the rail transportation system and in supply of railway coaches, locos and parts. In September 2008, NHPC signed an agreement for development of the Tamanthiand Shwezaye Hydro-Electric Power project in Chindwin River. A heavy turbo-truck assembly plant set up in Myanmar by TATA Motors with GOI financial assistance was inaugurated on December 31, 2010.

Other projects include revamping of the Ananda Temple in Bagan, upgradation of the Yangon Children's Hospital and Sittwe General Hospital. India has also assisted in the reconstruction of one high school and 6 primary schools in Tarlay township, the area worst affected by the severe earthquake that struck north-eastern Myanmar in March 2011.<sup>8</sup>

A proper roadmap of Indian Govt-Industry plan should include such sectors which not only gives inclusive growth to Myanmar but also regional growth for our eastern states however what needs to be kept in mind by the Indian Industry and the Government is the wider interest of the north eastern states so that the dividends of growth are seen on both sides of the border areas. The proposals must stress upon the development of road and communication infrastructure to support the projects undertaken through the land route. A proper planning of the projects can have a long term impact of development for both the economies; Myanmar and the North East India. We must think in terms of harnessing the energy reserves in Myanmar and may be creating some energy-processing hubs in the eastern states for subsequent usage in the development of the adjoining areas. Setting up of ancillary industry for supply to specific projects in Myanmar can also be planned and some economic zones can be specified for such purpose. It should be reframed to be more of a 'Look-East through North-East' policy instead of just 'Look-East' Policy.

High level visits have been a regular feature of India-Myanmar relations for several years and it increased further after the new government came to power in 2010.

President Thein Sein paid a State visit to India on October 12-15, 2011 and had a meeting with the Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh, which was followed by delegation level talks. President Thein Sein was accompanied by Chief of General Staff Lt Gen HlaHtay Win and 11 Union Ministers and one Union Deputy Minister and senior officials. With the objective of the visit to share India's experience in parliamentary practices and procedures with the visiting Myanmar delegation In December 2011 Speaker of PyithuHluttaw (Lower House) Thura U Shwe Mann led a high level parliamentary delegation to India. Myanmar Foreign Minister U WunnaMaung Lwin paid an official visit to India from January 22-26, 2012. All these visits were finally followed by Prime Minister of India Dr. Manmohan Singh's visit to Myanmar in May 2012<sup>9</sup>. This was the first visit of an Indian PM in 25 years. During the visit, several new initiatives were announced and signed 12 MoUs and agreements including extension of a new line of credit (LOC) worth US\$500 million. In Nov 2012 Aung San SuuKyi visited India and spoke at the prestigious Jawahar Lal Nehru memorial lecture in which she stressed the strong bondages the two nations share.

It seems, China, vary of the growing visits of Indian and western dignitaries sent its, Deputy chairman of the Chinese Central Military Commission (CMC) Gen Fan Changlong to meet President Thein Sein and the Myanmar Army Chief Senior General Min Hling in Oct this year. The present visit by the Indian Army chief Gen Bikram Singh from Oct 29 to Nov 1, 2013 is important because of its timings also because of the bridges it is likely to build. The visit by the Indian Army Chief at this point of time will bolster the growing proximity between the two nations and also commence the build up of much needed military ties between the two armies. During this visit Gen Singh held talks with President Thein Sein, Foreign Minister U WunnaMaung Lwin, Commander-in-chief of the defence services, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, among others. Gen Singh also handed over two wargaming software packages called "Combat decision resolution" and "Infantry company commanders tactical trainer" which have been customized for

training for the Myanmar Army<sup>7</sup>. He also gave five hand-gliders for the Defence Services Academy at PwinOo Lwin. Another gesture was to incorporate Myanmar armed forces special training packages in the Indian Army's counter-insurgency and jungle warfare school at Vairengte in Mizoram.

As it was also reported by the Indian media that Myanmar army is keen to look for courses in mechanised forces like tanks and infantry combat vehicles, information technology, intelligence and English language, among other areas<sup>10</sup>. The Myanmar Army chief will be making a visit to India in December 2013 to further cement the bond. The most significant part of the present visit of the Army Chief was the establishment of a Army training team at Myanmar. Here the India has an upper hand because till now Myanmar has not permitted any country to establish any such training establishment, not even China, the closest known ally for the last two decades. It is likely to give India an edge to further steer its economic ties to new horizons along with the military perspective with more strategical outlook.

To be mentioned that Myanmar's militarised democracy is making enormous reforms in its governance and is also showing remarkable improvement in its human rights record. The removal of the press censorship, release of over 1000 political prisoners and lifting of entry ban on many others, permission to its prominent political figure and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to travel abroad and the foreign investment are some positive steps.<sup>11</sup> There has been no reaction from the mighty military power *Tatmadaw* towards these reforms probably because as of now Myanmar needs proper political, economic and social development so that the country can move in the progressive direction. These steps have been welcomed by the democratic neighbour India and also by the western countries. Presently a full fledged democracy is necessary as seen in the western countries and India, instead of militarised democracy which has been the history of Myanmar.

The recent visit made by Indian Army Chief to Myanmar is another step in the right direction and is proof of India being seriously engaging Myanmar for betterment. Myanmar has recently projected supply of military hardware apart from economic and trade relations. India must take the consideration of the requirements in view of the long term relationship perspective.

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