

MYANMAR AT THE CROSSROADS: CURRENT REALITIES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**July 20-22, 2015**

JRD Tata Auditorium

NIAS

Since 2011 Myanmar has been experiencing significant political and economic transformation after five decades of military rule. Some of the positive signs of transformation include a nominally elected civilian government—led by a retired army general President Thein Sein, peace talks between government and ethnic armed groups, release of hundreds of political prisoners, including prominent opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, relaxation of media and press censorship and of trade unions, environmental and human rights organizations. Besides, a general election is scheduled at the end of this year. These positive changes in Myanmar have drawn considerable interest within the region and the world over. Several countries including the US have lifted sanctions previously imposed on Naypyidaw. Also, a large number of international agencies have an increasing presence and are actively participating in supporting Myanmar's development.

There is a loud and clear signal from Naypyidaw today that they “are open to do business with the world.” Its abundant natural resources—oil, gas, lumber and gemstones—and young working populace with a geopolitically strategic position, indeed, attract foreign investors and there is a surge in the number of international companies and countries that wants to do business in Myanmar today. This, along with Naypyidaw’s overtures toward inclusiveness with the international community—signal that they wish to be more business friendly and welcome investments. This in turn has solicited India’s attention too.

China, Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Japan are the major countries that have considerable presence in Myanmar today. Moreover, these nation-states are also actively engaging the former isolated Myanmar. Notably, with the West sanctioning Myanmar after the crackdown of the democratic movement in 1988, China has utilized the opportunity to scale up its ties with Naypyidaw. Beijing’s desire to gain land access to the Indian Ocean and the Andaman Sea via Myanmar by bypassing the Strait of Malacca has in fact been the basis for the Chinese strategic partnership with Myanmar. Also, in terms of energy security and Beijing’s search for new market, Myanmar finds special importance to China. In fact, Beijing is the biggest investor in Myanmar with US\$14.25 billion in cumulative investment as of 2014. The economic and political clout of Beijing in Myanmar has been influential. Thailand and Hong Kong are next largest investors with US\$10.11 billion and US\$6.55 billion respectively. This indicates a growing race to engage with Myanmar and at the same time aiming to take away the space occupied by China so far.

Myanmar which shares 1,600 km land border with India and also a maritime boundary in the strategically important Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea becomes vital. In India’s strategic thinking, better cooperation with Naypyidaw would benefit India on cross-border counterinsurgency efforts, with possible tapping of natural resources in Myanmar that may effectively contribute to the development of India’s Northeast states. Indian projects such as the Kaladan River and new port in Sittwe hopes to provide the landlocked provinces of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh a link to international trading routes through the Bay of Bengal. Besides, Myanmar’s location is essential to India’s Act East policy and in diluting China’s influence in the region. The shared historical, ethnic, cultural and religious linkage between two countries has generated a sense of advantage of constructive engagement. Notably Myanmar’s interest in India is to obtain technology and infrastructure assistance for its planned development along with a strategy to avoid Chinese undue influence over it.

Inevitably, many, including India, are best placed to profit from the new opportunities that exist today in Myanmar. But many hurdles remain for foreign investors and outside powers. The ongoing ethnic conflict in the periphery and increasing anti-Muslim violence are some of the factors that, if not addressed, could undermine the transition and may incite more upheaval. Analysts claim that peace and stability will be achieved only if the majority Bamar can settle the disputes with its minorities. Significantly, the weak infrastructure—railroads, airports and roads,—mobile communications and internet desperately need overhauling which appears to be pushing the majoritarian government towards tangible solutions. For every positive change, there is an equally compelling negativity.

Given this background, the international conference on '*Myanmar At The Crossroads: Current Realities, Challenges And Opportunities*' organized by the International Strategic and Security Studies (ISSSP), at National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bangalore, intends to discuss and deliberate on the dynamics of political change and regime transition in Myanmar and what it means for the world today and in particular for India. Notably, it is critical to explore how these changes will evolve in the coming years and its impact on politics, economy and society of the country and Myanmar's relations with other powers. The Conference also intends to address the developments that are shaping the internal dynamics apart from mapping challenges and opportunities in Myanmar. It is in this context that understanding India's approach towards Myanmar and developing a coherent posture towards the south-east Asian neighbour becomes significant in order to attain its larger strategic interests. Therefore, a careful examination and analysis of this becomes the main focus of the conference. For long, India has discussed and debated the 'Look East', now called 'Act East', policy, as well as better road and rail connectivity that would boost tourism and investments in the Northeast. However, while the policy discusses what it would include as its goals — development, connectivity to Southeast Asia, more economic growth, etc. — very few in Northeast India understand why it is important for them, or how it will contribute to the prosperity of the region. Hence, it is also essential to understand the Northeast perspective on Myanmar. Finally it becomes imperative to understand the political, economic and defence engagement of China with the Myanmar.

The key thematic questions that will weave together the multiple interactive sessions of the conference are:-

1. How far will the changes in Myanmar go? Are the changes in Myanmar are irreversible?
2. Does the change in Myanmar signify a real transition or is this a more spin and propaganda from the military, designed to relax international pressure while maintaining their grip on power?
3. Will the general elections slated for October/November this year affect ongoing reforms? And what lies ahead in Myanmar?
4. How is the Myanmar-China relationship evolving?
5. Does India have leverage in Myanmar vis-a-vis rising profile of other powers?
6. Will India's approach towards Myanmar suffice in the post-2011 scenario? If not what can be the appropriate approach that India can have?
7. Does the stability in Myanmar's periphery in turn secure India's own north-eastern region?
8. What are the challenges and opportunities that exist in Myanmar for India and in particular for the Indian industry?

These questions indeed will be the subject of conference at the ISSSP, NIAS on 20-22 July 2015. The conference will make an attempt to identify recommendations for policy makers to strengthen the relations between the two countries.

II Sub Themes

The proposed conference will seek to engage experts to provide a platform for Indian policy practitioners and Myanmar analyst for undertaking serious deliberations on the following priority sub-themes:

1. *Understanding Myanmar (Internal Dynamics, Transition, etc.)*
 - ⊙ Centre-periphery interaction
 - ⊙ Internal Dynamics - Ethnic groups and problems, Buddhist-Muslims Conflict
 - ⊙ Ethnic nationalities and the question of transition
 - ⊙ Principal Aspirations (national interest, domestic milieu, security Perspectives)
 - ⊙ Future of Myanmar's democratic transition
2. *Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environment*
 - ⊙ Estimated availability of natural resources – where, how long it will exist etc.
 - ⊙ Management/ Mismanagement and relations to conflict
3. *Science and Technology, Defence and Industry capabilities*
 - ⊙ Status of Technology, Higher Education and Industries in Myanmar – strengthens and weakens
 - ⊙ Role of Military - Civil-military relations, Tatmadaw's relations with regional players, Tatmadaw's military dependency
4. *Dynamics of Myanmar's relations with Regional and Global Powers*
 - ⊙ Role, influence, aid, projects and investment of the US, ASEAN, EU, Japan and other powers
 - ⊙ The Bay of Bengal, Indian Ocean and Myanmar
5. *Chinese Strategy and Role in Myanmar*
 - ⊙ Historical and Geographical contours of relations
 - ⊙ Sector-wise Chinese footprint in Myanmar (coal, oil, gas, uranium)
 - ⊙ China-Myanmar military relations
 - ⊙ Overall China's strategy in Myanmar
6. *Significance of Myanmar and India's engagement*
 - ⊙ Historical and Geographical contours of relations
 - ⊙ India and Myanmar: Mutual perceptions and perspectives
 - ⊙ India's North East Perspective on Myanmar
 - ⊙ Attitude and perception of India's External Affairs and Defence Establishment towards Myanmar
 - ⊙ Prospects of India's Defence Cooperation (scope of weapon and support systems technology exports)
7. *Mapping Opportunities, Risk and Challenges*
 - ⊙ Existing opportunities for India and Indian Companies for joint venture, investment etc. Internal and External Challenges
 - ⊙ Challenges and risk of scaling up our engagement and investment, joint ventures etc.

Conference Secretariat

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