

Engaging Inscrutable

MYANMAR

RSN Singh

THE RECENT VISIT (8-10 MARCH, 2006) OF President APJ Abdul Kalam to Myanmar was an epoch making event, as it was the first visit by an Indian Head of State to that country. Coming on the heels of the visit of President George Bush to India, who had adversely commented on the military regime and its human rights record – President Kalam’s Myanmar visit was a reiteration of India’s independent and pragmatic foreign policy with regard to its neighbours. For the ruling *military junta* i.e. State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in Myanmar, the visit was a signal



of the country’s growing integration with the international community and the much needed maneuver space in exercise of its external relations vis-à-vis China.

India shares some critical facets with Myanmar. They are :-

- Energy requirements, particularly natural gas.
- Infrastructural development projects for the coordinated development of India’s North-East and Western Myanmar.
- Coordinated efforts to counter insurgency astride India-Myanmar border.
- Counter narcotics.
- Myanmar constitutes the key gateway to the South East Asian countries.
- Myanmar is a relatively virgin country with regard to prospects of economic engagement.
- Myanmar is India’s maritime interlocutor with regard to the Bay of Bengal and Andaman sea by virtue of Coco Island.

To a better part of the international community Myanmar and particularly its armed forces, which is at the helm, are inscrutable. It has probably learnt to live with international (western) isolation. The isolation created a void in Myanmar in the early

90s and China rushed to recompense, in fact it has moved beyond; diplomatically, economically and militarily. The South East Asian countries followed China and Myanmar was admitted as a full member of ASEAN in 1997. The impact of economic sanctions by the US and other western countries has gradually become minimal. India in conformity with its strategic interests has been increasingly wooing Myanmar since mid 90s. It culminated in the visit of Senior General Than Shwe in October 2004. This was the first state visit by a head of state of Myanmar in 25 years. The timing of the visit had a major strategic importance as it came in wake of the removal of General Khin Nyunt (protégé of Gen Ne Win), who was appointed Prime Minister in 2003. General Khin Nyunt as the head of Myanmar’s military intelligence setup and Office of Strategic Studies was a powerful figure in Myanmar’s military dispensation. He was known to have very strong leanings towards China.

Very few countries in the world have faced such unremitting insurgencies since their inception, as Myanmar. The entire country has indeed been ringed by some vicious insurgent groups. The opium cultivation and narcotics industry in Myanmar have impacted on the global security sensitivities. Without absolving the present regime’s political inconsistencies and equivocation, it must also be considered that it assumed power under some very extenuating circumstances. A major achievement of the Myanmar’s present military regime has been its relative success in amalgamation of insurgent and fringe groups in the national mainstream. For this, much of the credit goes to the ousted Prime Minister Gen Khin Nyunt. Militarily, Myanmar is an inward looking country. Given the internal compulsions of Myanmar, it would be wrong to expect an Indian template of democracy to be suitable for that country. India’s strategic imperative must override every other consideration.

INNER AND OUTER MYANMAR

Myanmar has been ringed with insurgencies in the sense that its border areas have, without exception, been insurgency prone. Tribes of

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different ethnic extraction such as the Arakanes, the Chins, the Nagas, the Kachins, the Shans, the Karens, and the Mons, inhabit the frontier areas of Myanmar. When the SLORC assumed power, there were more than 16 active insurgent groups, the most formidable being the Karen National Union (KNU), the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO). During the colonial period, the British were inclined to refer and treat the country as Outer Burma and Inner Burma.

There are scholarly opinions that the British used the academic discipline of Anthropology as a divisive tool. These ethnic groups, experts aver, were well integrated with the majority Barmars and the country as such. The evangelizing by American Christian missionaries, who arrived in Myanmar in the wake of British colonization, indoctrinated the tribals with ideas of separateness. A large number of them converted to Christianity. China, which had effusively aided the CPB in the 70s, jettisoned in favour of the SLORC regime in order to make inroads into Myanmar. With the snap of its support line, the CPB collapsed by 1989. The CPB comprised mainly Wa hill tribesman in Eastern Myanmar and Kokan Chinese in the north. The repudiation of the CPB by China is a case in example of ruthless pragmatism of Chinese diplomacy.

The Kachins, the second largest group after the Karens, signed a ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar Government in October 1993. In 1994, ceasefire agreements were also signed with the Shans, the PaO, the Palungs and the Mons. The major insurgency that continues to bedevil Myanmar is from the Karens. However, the Myanmar authorities allegedly engineered a split in the Karen National Union (KNU) on religious lines resulting in the separation of the Buddhist elements from that organisation. The Karens are predominantly Christians. Consequent to an offensive by the Myanmar Army in 1995, the KNU headquarters at Mannerplaw was destroyed and its members escaped to Thailand.

One of the major achievements of the military (SPDC) regime therefore has been to preserve the unity of the nation by getting most of the insurgent groups into the legal fold, even though the linkages are tenuous and integration is far from complete. Many of these insurgent groups are permitted to retain their weapons and have immense say in issues that are specific to their tribal culture and homeland. Apart from the KNU, there are still insurgent groups in Arakan (Rakhine State), Chin Hills, Myanmar Naga Hills and Shan Area who continue to spurn offers for a ceasefire.



MYANMAR AND CHINA

The international isolation of Myanmar compelled it to turn towards China for its economic and military needs. China was the first country to recognize the SLORC (now SPDC) government in 1988. Since the assumption of power by the SLORC, there have been inroads by China in nearly all facets of infrastructure development and the military. China has provided assistance in building roads, bridges, railways, airfields, sugar plants, textile factories, plywood plants, rice mills and coal-fired power plants. The current value of China-Myanmar border trade is nearly US \$ 1 billion. China has also emerged as the largest arms supplier to Myanmar. In 1991, the two countries struck a defence deal of US \$ 1 billion and another deal of US \$ 400 million in 1994. More than 70% of the Myanmar's military equipment inventory is of Chinese origin. Though off late, there have been discernible moves by Myanmar to diversify its sourcing pattern. Myanmar has recently acquired 12 x Mig-29 from Russia. Myanmar's over-dependence on China, now probably runs too deep to be neutralized or supplanted in the foreseeable future.

MYANMAR AND ASEAN

Initially, the response of the ASEAN countries was lukewarm towards the SLORC regime. Later, as the ASEAN economy boomed, the grouping acquired new confidence to expand its membership to include countries like Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam. Despite the US pressures due to Myanmar's poor human rights record and allegedly flaccid attitude towards narcotic trafficking – Thailand invited Myanmar to the Annual ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in 1994. In 1995, Myanmar acceded to ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and in July 1997, was admitted as a full member of ASEAN, despite protests by the US and the European Union. Even before Myanmar became a member of ASEAN, some of its members like Thailand and Singapore had made substantial investments in various projects and joint ventures in Myanmar. In 1993, Singapore hotel and tourism

companies had signed a US \$ 465 million deal with Myanmar. In 1996, some 20 foreign banks mainly from Thailand and Singapore had opened their branches in Myanmar. Without being deterred by the economic sanctions imposed by its close ally, the US; Singapore has been supplying defence items like communication equipment to Myanmar. All this was possible due to the policy of economic liberalization initiated by the SLORC regime.

MYANMAR AND INDIA

In the early 20th century, consequent to the complete colonization of Burma (Myanmar), Indians began to arrive in Myanmar, basically, as administrative support elements of the British authorities. By the 1930s, the Indian population had reached to about a million and consisted of lawyers, doctors, landowners and businessmen. Rangoon (Yangon) in fact had Indian majority. In addition, a large number of Indians formed part of British troops stationed in that country. Pre-independence, the Indian National Congress openly supported the Myanmar Nationalist Movement led by U Nu and Aung San. After independence, there was an excellent personal chemistry between Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru and U Nu, who was an ardent supporter of the Non-aligned Movement. The relations between the two countries hit an extremely low pitch when Ne Win began to nationalize shops, business and trading establishments, which forced many persons of Indian origin to leave the country.

In 70s, however, the Ne Win government extended support to India's peaceful nuclear explosion in 1974 and also countenanced the Indian proposal of declaring Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace. In the post-SLORC period, the relations between the two countries remained at a low key but deteriorated over India's support to Aung San Suu Kyi and especially after her being conferred with the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding for the year 1993 (though announced in 1995).

Nevertheless, in the mid 90s, India adopted a Look East Policy with all earnestness and accordingly began to reach out to Myanmar. In the year 1997, India's Border Roads Organization undertook the construction of 165 Kms long road between Tamu and Kalemio in Western Myanmar. The road project, which was totally financed by India, was inaugurated by the then India's Foreign Minister Mr Jaswant Singh during his visit to Myanmar in February 2001. The road links Moreh in India's Manipur State with Kalemio and is likely to link up with Mandalay in Central Myanmar in the near future. There is a proposal to finally extend this link to the rest of South-East Asia. The watershed diplomatic event in the recent time was the visit of Vice Senior General Maung Aye (Deputy Chairman of SPDC and C-in-C of Myanmar Army)

to India in November 2000. This visit was reciprocated by the Indian Vice-President when he visited Myanmar in November 2003. During Mr Jaswant Singh's visit to Myanmar, the two countries decided to open four additional trading points including one linking Champai (Mizoram, India) to Yangon. India's bilateral trade with Myanmar is worth US \$470 million. India is Myanmar's fourth largest trading partner after Thailand, China and Singapore. The border trade between India and Myanmar, of which Tamu-Moreh and Zowkhathar-Rih land routes constitute the main trade axis has the potential to reach US \$ 2 billion in the coming years.

The high point of India-Myanmar relations was capped by the state visit (24-29 October 2004) of the Senior General Than Shwe, who as Chairman of the SPDC is the Head of the State. During the visit three MOUs relating to cooperation in the field of traditional security, Tamanthi Hydroelectric Project and cultural exchange programme were signed. India also extended a line of credit of US \$ 7 million to Myanmar for two telecom projects and US \$ 3 million for IT related projects. Importantly, a MoU was also signed by India's former External Affairs Minister Mr K Natwar Singh and Myanmar's Foreign Minister Mr U Nyan Win on cooperation in the field of Non-Traditional Security Issues. This included bilateral cooperation against terrorism, arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and cyber crime. Besides, the two sides had also agreed to exchange visits involving each other's Army, Navy and Air Force; as also port calls by each other's naval vessels. Consequently, two Indian Navy vessels INS Ranjit (guided missile destroyer) and INS Kuthar (missile corvette) visited Yangon (22-26 December, 2005) and carried out exercises with the Myanmar Navy. The Myanmar Navy also attended the Milan exercise (9-14 January 2006) hosted by the Indian Navy in India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Indian Army Chief General J J Singh and the India Naval Chief Admiral Arun Prakash also visited Myanmar in December 2005 and January 2006 respectively.

Besides the unprecedented diplomatic manifestations of the recent visit by President APJ Abdul Kalam to Myanmar, the two countries further strengthen their commitment to cooperation in areas of mutual cooperation, which significantly includes supply of gas by Myanmar from its offshore fields located off the Arakan coasts. The supply mode could be through pipelines via India's northeast, thus obviating the route through Bangladesh, which has been played difficult in

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acceding to the proposal. Alternatively, the gas could also be shipped by converting it to LNG. The visit also has given impetus to the other important projects such as the Tamanthi Hydroelectric Power Project (1000 MW), the Asian Highway Project and the Kaladan River Project, which has the potential to provide India's northeast access to sea via Myanmar's port outlet at Sittwe.

ARMED FORCES AND INTERNAL SECURITY

There has been a massive expansion of the Armed Forces in the post-SLORC period i.e. from 2,08,500 to 5,81,500 personnel, and increase in the defence spending, which has now tapered. Although, the Myanmar Armed Forces in terms of modernisation had stagnated for many years, the main reason behind the unprecedented accent on refurbishment and expansion of the Armed Forces was to dominate the country's domestic politics and curb insurgency. As it is, since its independence, the focus of military application had been on internal security operations. The National League for Democracy (NLD) has been sagacious enough in not burning its bridges with the military in general as it feels that its support in any future dispensation will be crucial. This is one of the factors that may

have contributed to the sustenance of military regime despite stiff opposition from various quarters.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

For India, the strategic importance of Myanmar is predicated on some inalterable imperatives and stakes. Unfortunately, these have been accorded their due consideration rather belatedly. Myanmar shares 1643 Kms boundary with India. There are four Indian states in the northeast that have common borders with Myanmar i.e. Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. Sociologically and geographically there is a great deal of commonality and affinity between Western Myanmar and these Indian states. This has resulted into a thriving illegal trade, which is several times more than the official trade. Both Western Myanmar and northeastern part of India barring Mizoram are afflicted with insurgencies. Also afflicting the Northeast are the weapons and drugs that find their way from Myanmar. The drug problem has in fact assumed serious proportions and has begun to impact on the social fabric of Indian Northeast. Some of the Indian insurgent groups like the NSCN (K) have their bases in Western Myanmar, which also serve as safe haven for other groups like the ULFA. Given the trans-border nature of the insurgencies, the complementarities of Western Myanmar have to be taken into account for any enduring solution. Western Myanmar and Northeast India are characterized by the rugged terrain, lack of communications and underdevelopment. There has to be a coordinated approach between the two countries not only in combating insurgencies in their respective territories but also towards infrastructural and economic development.

The two countries in 2004 took tentative steps towards coordinating their efforts in extending the railway network in the region. India has been also keen to assist in the development of Kyaukphyu Port on Myanmar's western coast, and so has been China. The port once developed can provide access to sea to India's northeast through Mizoram. An imbalanced development can trigger different kinds of demographic and security problems. It was only appropriate that ministers from four Indian northeastern states accompanied Mr Jaswant Singh during his visit to Myanmar, as India's Foreign Minister in February 2001.

The developments in Western Myanmar impinge directly on the security environment in India's Northeast. Ingress of influence by any power inimical to India in this region has the potential to upset India's strategic balance. Certain quarters have been making inferences that China has been making in-roads into Western Myanmar by way of economic and infrastructural projects with the aim of strategic encirclement of India. In

AMBIENCE OF THE NATION

The Indian economy is an ascending trajectory. Our foreign exchange reserves are continuously growing, the rate of inflation is coming down and our technological competence is being globally recognized. With the energy of 540 million youth, umbilical connectivities of 20 million people of Indian origin in various parts of our planet, and the interest shown by many developed countries to invest in our engineers and scientists including the setting up of new R&D centers, India is in a position to embark on innovative projects. India with its one billion people with multi-cultural, multi-language and multi-religious backgrounds, has chosen the path of democracy since its independence in 1947. India's technological competence and value systems with civilizational heritage are highly respected. Foreign Institutional Investors (FII's) also find investing in India attractive. Indians are also investing abroad and are opening new business ventures. Indian Foreign Direct Investment in British capital is second only to that of the USA and Indian FDI projects in Europe has increased from just 5 to 119 during the period 1997 to 2004. Indian industry is very keen to invest in Myanmar's infrastructure projects. India's GDP has grown at 8.1% in the year 2005-06 and we expect to reach a 10% growth rate very soon. We would definitely like to share our experiences with Myanmar in promoting economic growth of both our nations. It will be of special significance to the Indian people as we share a lot of common civilizational heritage.

...We recognise today that India-Myanmar relations have an important bearing on the peace, stability and development of our region and the Asian continent. With the irreversible trend of regional integration in Asia, we increasingly look at Myanmar as a key element in our "Look East" policy and a trusted partner in our vision for a dynamic and vibrant Pan-Asian Community of peace and prosperity.

— President APJ Abdul Kalam in Myanmar

the 70s, there were allusions of Chinese assistance to Indian insurgencies in the northeast, wherein the Kachins (insurgent group in Northern Myanmar, now in the legal fold) served as conduit and facilitator. Of late, there have been unconfirmed reports to the effect that the Myanmar government has begun to solicit Pak assistance in upgradation of airfields of World War-II vintage (in disuse) in areas close to the Indian border in Western Myanmar. Undoubtedly the terrain of Western Myanmar is most inhospitable due to lack of communication and has therefore facilitated insurgent activities astride the India-Myanmar border. This is a common refrain with the Myanmar authorities for their inadequacies in dealing with the insurgents. Therefore, while the infrastructural development in Western Myanmar is an extremely positive development and will contribute towards a better security environment, the motives of some of the benefactor countries may not be entirely benign.

Myanmar also shares 2185 Km boundary with China, 193 Km with Bangladesh, 235 Km with Laos and 1800 Km with Thailand. It is a strategic interlocutor and a buffer between two giants, India and China. China has already made significant in-roads in the upper and eastern parts

of Myanmar by way of infrastructural development and commercial activities. Such is the level of Chinese influence that many experts use the term "Sinonization of Upper Myanmar" to describe the phenomenon. There is a rapid increase in the economic complementarity and interdependence between the Yunnan Province of China and eastern parts of Myanmar. The infrastructural and economic integration of the border regions of Myanmar and India as compared to Myanmar and China is palpably low. If this imbalance is not addressed by India, the Chinese influence may become predominant in Western Myanmar, even though Myanmar has informally maintained that it will not allow any activity by any outside power west of Chindwin River (flowing

parallel to Indo-Myanmar border) in keeping with the security sensitivities of India. There is a strong opinion that it was to check the Chinese influence in Myanmar that prodded the ASEAN countries to adopt the policy of constructive engagement (before 1997) when Myanmar's international isolation was more severe than at present. In 1997, Myanmar, despite pressures from the US and other western countries, was admitted as a full member of the ASEAN.

Myanmar's entry into ASEAN has brought the latter to India's neighbourhood and has exciting economic possibilities. Myanmar is the potential land bridge between the other ASEAN countries such as Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. The proposed surface communication links by construction of a road expressway linking India and Thailand through Myanmar will enhance the complementarity between India and Myanmar, and therefore develop high stakes in a favourable security environment in the border region for both the countries.

Myanmar is extremely rich in precious stones particularly jade and strategic minerals like uranium. The Kachin state of Myanmar abounds in them. Myanmar also has significant gas reserves estimated to be between 300-500 billion cubic meters. It has a promising potential for large exports of gas to its neighbours including India. There have been promising tentative proposals for pipeline supply of gas from Myanmar to India. In fact, Myanmar already exports gas from its Yadana offshore gas field in the Gulf of Martban to Thailand through a more than 400 Km pipeline. The project was a result of a joint venture between the US company (Unocal), a French Company and subsidiary of Thai Petroleum Authority. The gas is used for fuel power plants in Thailand. As a result of this project, Unocal claims to have spent more US \$ 10 million in socio-economic programmes and generated employment opportunities to 2000 Myanmar citizens. It is rather significant that the diplomatic and economic isolation of Myanmar by the US did not come in way of the commercial interests of the US company Unocal.

Myanmar with a coastline of more than 1,900 Km occupies a prominent position in the Indian Ocean. Its coastline with respect to the Bay of Bengal is of a strategic concern to India. After the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan, the maritime threat obtaining from the Bay of Bengal has considerably reduced. However, some media reports have attributed that China has intentions of gaining foothold in the Indian Ocean by attaining access to bases like Sittwe and Kyaukpuyu in Myanmar's Arakan coast (western coast). Media reports have also alluded of Pakistan's efforts to gain access to Myanmar's western seaboard on speciously innocuous pretexts like goodwill visits and for providing training to Myanmar Navy personnel on certain types of vessels. Strategically, these alleged maneuverings by China and Pakistan make logical sense, as China with super power ambitions and heavy dependence on oil from West Asia needs to register its presence in Indian Ocean, however tentative it may be to begin with; while Pakistan bereft of its presence in the Bay of Bengal after the loss of Bangladesh needs to checkmate Indian naval assets on the India's eastern seaboard. These reports however are far fetched and have

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little basis of truth, given Myanmar's sensitivities with regard to foreign military presence on its soil.

An outlet to the Indian Ocean may be a serious economic compulsion for China. The Shanghai port in China is at nearly 5,000 Kms by road from its Yunnan Province that borders Eastern Myanmar. The Yunnan Province is fast turning into an economic hub and a tourist destination. The goods manufactured in this province can only retain their cost competitiveness if they have a shorter sea outlet. Myanmar offers an attractive proposition by way of the Irrawaddy River, which links up with the Indian Ocean and is navigable for a distance of 1,600 Kms. Accordingly, the two countries are reportedly engaged in negotiations over providing an outlet for Chinese goods through the Irrawaddy corridor. There are reports to suggest that a river port at Bhamo in Northern Myanmar has already been upgraded for the purpose. Notwithstanding the commercial benefits that may accrue to Myanmar, there are reports that the Myanmar authorities are skeptical about the proposal because of its strategic imports.

The proximity of Myanmar's Coco Islands i.e. 34 nautical miles from the Indian Andaman and Nicobar Islands is another crucial strategic interface between the two countries. There have been umpteen media reports about the military facilities (airfield, monitoring and naval) being upgraded with Chinese assistance in the Coco Islands. These reports however have not been corroborated with any degree of certainty. India plausibly may have become more sensitive to any developments in the Coco Islands after the establishment of a tri-service command in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

THREAT PERCEPTION

In the short term, Myanmar does not perceive any direct threat of protracted or limited external aggression. The country is bestowed with well defined natural barriers on three sides backed up by two major river systems in both the East and West, supplemented by a long monsoon season precluding sustained large scale campaigning and border communications that could be put to use by an aggressor. Along with this, the absence of external aggression in its modern history and the relatively dispute free status of its borders have conferred on Myanmar a degree of confidence whereby so far it has not developed a manned defensive lines in any theatre, but has maintained troops to dominate insurgency prone border areas with a dual / subsidiary task of holding limited frontage defences should the need arise.

The 2080 Km long Sino-Myanmar boundary has been demarcated by a treaty in October 1960. Under this treaty, Myanmar gave up the areas of Kangfung, Gawlum and Hpinmaw, an area of approximately 835 Sq Km to China. It is of special interest to note that the demarcated boundary

between Myanmar and China generally follows the Macmohan line. It's 193 Km boundary with Bangladesh runs along the Naaf River. There have been occasional clashes in the recent past between the Nasaka (border force of Myanmar) and the Bangladesh Rifles (border force of Bangladesh) over disputes related to construction activities in or within the vicinity of Naaf River. Myanmar has no major contentious border disputes with India and most of the border is clearly demarcated. However, there has been tension along 1800 Km Myanmar-Thai border in the recent period. Thailand accuses Myanmar for non-action and indifference to the drug manufacturing activities of the United Shan Wa Army (USWA) which has returned to the legal fold in Myanmar and is being used by the dispensation to marginalize other anti-government Shan groups. As per the assessment of the Thai authorities there are more than two dozens factories being run by the USWA, which are engaged in production of *methamphetamine* drug, which have flooded the Thai market causing internal security and social problems. In the year 2000, Thai officials had estimated that 600 million tablets of *methamphetamine* had flooded Thailand. The narcotics problem, in fact, resulted in armed clashes between the two countries in February 2001. This was for the first time that Myanmar had mobilized its armed forces in such a large number in many years. Currently, there are more than 50,000 Myanmar Army troops deployed on the Thai-Myanmar border.

There appears to be some shift in Myanmar's threat perception with regard to Thailand as it is seen to be trying to achieve military parity with that country. Recently, it acquired 10 x Mig-29 aircraft from Russia at a cost of US \$ 130 million and it is attributed that this purchase was motivated by a desire to countervail Thailand's acquisition of F-16 aircraft. Moreover, the clashes involving the navies of the two countries over illegal fishing by Thai trawlers of the Tanintharyi coast has become an endemic feature. Even though, there is overwhelming dependence on China because of military and economic imperatives, it is not that the Myanmar authorities are completely at ease or naïve about its strategic import and consequences. Myanmar has begun to diversify its dependence and is reaching out to India, Pakistan, Russia, Israel and most of the countries in the ASEAN.

The major contentious issue between Myanmar and the global community is the issue of opium production and drug manufacturing. Myanmar is the second largest producer of illicit opium estimated to be approximately 1000 metric tons. It is also estimated that more than 70000

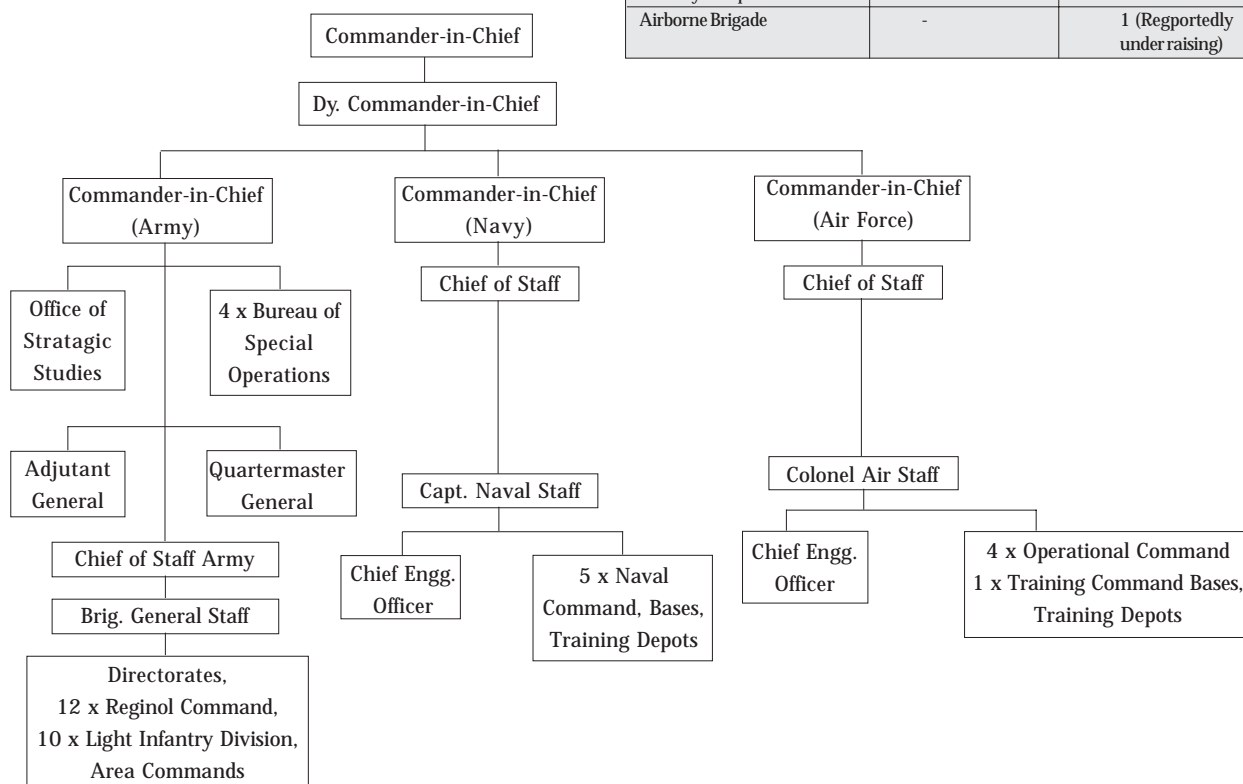
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hectares in Myanmar is under opium cultivation. Myanmar is also the major source of *methamphetamine* and heroine for regional and global consumption. Despite the fact that the Myanmar authorities effected the surrender of the country's most infamous drug lord *Khunsa* and his Mong Tai Army in January 1996, the US and other western countries allege Myanmar of doing very little to curtail the narcotic menace. Since the problem of narcotics has global dimensions, it is a major determinant in shaping the international opinion and approach towards Myanmar.

In the first decade of its rule, the SLORC regime was overwhelmingly pre-occupied with fighting / taming insurgencies. No country in the world has faced insurgencies simultaneously all along its frontiers in proportions, as has Myanmar. Even though, insurgency has considerably abated, it nevertheless continues to dominate Myanmar's threat perception. However, the attenuation in the intensity of insurgencies has enabled Myanmar to focus on its conventional military capabilities and economic issues.

STRUCTURE OF ARMED FORCES



EXPANSION OF THE ARMED FORCES

There has been a three-fold increase in the personnel strength of the Armed Forces from the pre-SLORC period. The comparative strength of the Armed Forces in the pre-SLORC period and at present are :-

	Pre-SLORC	Present
Army	1,92,300	5,48,000
Navy	9,000	17,500
Air Force	7,250	16,000
TOTAL	2,08,500	5,81,500

The personnel strength of Myanmar Armed Forces was approximately 3,50,000 in 1995. This rapid expansion could not have been possible without Chinese assistance in training, equipment and military aid. The accretion in the units and formations in the Myanmar Army from the pre-SLORC period are as under :-

	Pre-SLORC	Present
Commands	9	12 (Triangle Command & Coastal Command newly raised)
Light Infantry Division (LID)	8	11
Light Infantry Regiments (LIR)/Myanmar Regiments (MR) (equivalent to Battalion)	156	412
Armour Regiments	2	7
Artillery Regiments	4	22
Artillery Companies	-	27
Airborne Brigade	-	1 (Reportedly under raising)

The imperative for raising the Triangle Command was to fight the menace of the thriving opium cultivation and drug industry at the border tri-junction area of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand known as the Golden Triangle. The Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent (Pakistan and Afghanistan) are the two leading sources of narcotics and are matter of acute international concern. The creation of a Coastal Command whose operational responsibility covers the southern tail of Myanmar of Tanintharyi region is reflective of Myanmar's threat perception. The area is of narrow width and shares boundary with Thailand. It is infested with insurgents who operate from bases in Thailand leading to the border tensions between the two countries. Moreover, the waters off the Tanintharyi coast have been the scene of endemic clashes between the Myanmar and Thai Navies over intrusions by Thai fishing trawlers. A sea borne invasion has historical precedence. The British captured lower Myanmar in 1826 by first establishing foothold on the southern coast.

The size of the Myanmar Army is in no way reflective of its combat power; in fact there is a huge mis-match. This is due to the fact that the Army is primarily oriented towards counter insurgency and law enforcement role. Unlike other conventional armies, it does not have adequate support elements and is marred by poor logistics and mobility. Nevertheless, in the past few years, Myanmar has begun to address these problems cogently.

There is a renewed emphasis on the Navy and the Air Force. The Navy, which is basically a riverine force and coastal force in support of the Army, is being upgraded, though it has still a long way to go. Under the new military regime, the Hainggyi Naval base (in proximity to the southern coast of Myanmar) is being developed with Chinese assistance. There are unconfirmed reports that China has been assisting Myanmar in upgrading the naval and other facilities at Coco Islands. The Navy still lacks a principal surface fighting ship, however it does plans to acquire brown water capability.

The Myanmar Air Force has four operational Air Commands, which includes the recently raised Coastal Air Command, and there are plans to raise an additional command. Myanmar inherited a number of airfields spread all over the country from the British, which were built during World War-II. A large number of these airfields particularly those located in the border areas have been in disuse but are now being resuscitated. The Air Force inventory since 1988 has more than doubled due to large purchases from China.

The expansion of the Armed Forces has spawned a host of other problems. The Myanmar Armed Forces personnel are rather poorly paid and in order to improve their economic well-being, they are permitted to dabble in business and are also

encouraged to be share holders in various government enterprises specially those related to defence.

ARMY

The Myanmar Army has 12 x Regional Commands i.e. Northern Command (HQ-Myitkyina), North West Command (HQ-Monywa), Western Command (HQ-Sittwe), South-West Command (HQ-Pathein), North East Command (HQ-Lashio), Central Command (HQ-Mandaiay), Southern Command (HQ-Toungoo), Yangon Command (HQ-Yangon), South East Command (HQ-Mawlawyine), Eastern Command (HQ-Tounggyi), Triangle Command (HQ-Kengtung), and Coastal Command (HQ-Myeik). It is the North West Command, which has direct operational interface with India. The Eastern Command and South Eastern Command cover the Myanmar-Thai border and are at present considered to be most sensitive due to standoff between the two countries over alleged drug trafficking from Myanmar to Thailand. The Triangle Command was specially created to curb the drug menace in the border tri-junction area of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand. Politically the Yangon Command is considered to be the most sensitive and holds the key to the military sustenance of the SPDC regime.

The Myanmar Army is deployed in what is referred to as a COINS GRID AREA (COUNTER INSURGENCY GRID AREA). The Eastern, South Eastern and Golden Triangle Commands have the heaviest deployment because of the insurgency and drug problem. The North and North Eastern Command are allocated second priority. In the North Western Command (opposite India) the deployment is relatively less due to the extremely difficult and underdeveloped terrain.

The Myanmar Army's inventory consists of approximately 200 x Tanks (Type-69 and Type-63), 250 x Tracked Armoured Fighting Vehicles (Type-85 and Type-90), 200 x Wheeled Armoured Fighting Vehicles (Hino-local manufacture, BAAC-83/84/85/86/87), 300 x Artillery Guns (estimated). It also has HN-5A and SA-16 surface-to-air missiles. As per some unconfirmed reports, it has acquired 100 Igla missiles from Russia.

NAVY

The Myanmar Navy has strength of approximately 17,500. It has a vast coastline of nearly 1930 Kms. However, despite its prominent location in the Indian Ocean, it accorded very little



importance to the Navy because of its pre-occupation with perpetuation of military regime and combating insurgency. Moreover, its state of economy and international isolation were imposing constraints towards modernization and expansion of its naval fleet. The primary aim of the Myanmar Navy had been to conduct counter-insurgency operations in conjunction with the Myanmar Army along the coastlines, rivers and inshore waters. The protection of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and trade was only a co-lateral aim. The Myanmar Navy is seized with the problem of Thai trawlers carrying out illegal fishing in its Myanmar waters to as far as its western coast. Lately, Myanmar has displayed earnest desire to address its maritime inadequacies. The Myanmar authorities are negotiating with China for supply of 3 x Jianghu-II class frigates. There are also unconfirmed reports about negotiations between Myanmar and Pakistan for procurement of Daphne class submarines from the latter. In the last few years, some Myanmar personnel have undergone submarine related training in China and Pakistan.

Presently, the Myanmar Navy has a very modest inventory consisting of 2 x Corvettes, 3 x Offshore Patrol Vessels, approximately 30 x Coastal Patrol Craft, 14 x River Gun Boats, 2 x Fast Attack Craft and 20 x small amphibious vessels. Most of the naval vessels are of Chinese origin. It also has acquired some C-801 missiles from China. The Myanmar's naval inventory also includes approximately 20 x Aircraft in maritime role.

The Myanmar Navy has 5 x Regional Commands i.e. Danyawady Naval Regional Command (Sittwe), Pamawaddy Naval Regional Command (Hainggyi Island), Ayeyarwady Naval Regional Command (Yangon), Mawrawady Naval Regional Command (Moulmein), Tanintharyi Naval Regional Command (Katan Island). The Hainggyi naval base was established in 1991 and placed under the Ayeyarwady Naval Regional Command. It has since been named Pamawady Naval Base. The Naval base is being developed with Chinese assistance. On completion, it would serve as a full-fledged transit base for large vessels. There are plans to develop a port at Kyauk-Phyu (harbour used by British in World War-II) on Myanmar's Western Coast with external assistance. Singapore, Japan, Malaysia, India and China have evinced interest in undertaking the project.

AIR FORCE

During the post-SLORC (now SPDC) era, there has been a steady increase of personnel, aircraft and helicopters in Myanmar's Air Force inventory. Even though, the Myanmar Air Force has substantial numbers of aircraft and helicopter assets of Russian origin, it is China which provided impetus to the upgradation of the Air Force. Some of the assistance provided by China includes : establishment of aircraft overhaul facility at Yangon by Poly Technologies China; construction

of hangers at Meiktila, Namhsan and at other airbases; and construction and upgradation of airfields including in the border areas. The major aircraft acquisitions from China include : FT-6, FT-7, F-7/II-K and A-5 fighter aircraft; PT-6 and K-8 (joint venture between China and Pak) trainer aircraft; and Y-8 transport aircraft.

Presently, the Myanmar Air Force has personnel strength of approximately 16,000 and has 113 x combat aircraft in its inventory i.e. 48 x F-7, 39 x A-5-II, 6 x G-4 Super Galeb, 10 x FT-7 and 10 x Mig-29. It also has 16 x transport aircraft, which includes 3 x F-27, 4 x FH-227, 5 x PC-6A/6B and 4 x Y-8. It has approximately 45 x trainer aircraft, which include 30 x PT-6 and 14 x K-8. Its helicopters assets comprise 20 x MI-2, 23 x Bell-205/206/212, 12 x MI-17 and 5 x Alouettee.

The Myanmar Air Force is organized into four Operational Air Commands and one Training Command i.e. Northern Air Command (Myitkyina), Central Air Command (Mandalay), Southern Air Command (Yangon), Coastal Air Command (Bassein – Patheingyi), Training Air Command (Meiktila). Each Air Command has three fighter squadrons, two transport squadrons and one helicopter squadron.

MORALE OF THE ARMED FORCES

There is a sizeable segment in the Myanmar Armed Forces, especially the officers of the new generation, who nurse a strong desire to distance themselves away from civil matters in favour of more professional orientation. Prolonged deployments in difficult and inhospitable insurgency areas, poor pay and service conditions, are having an adverse impact on the morale of the Armed Forces, particularly the Army. The Myanmar Armed Forces are sieged with the problem of desertion. A large number of Armed Forces personnel were known to have voted for the NLD in the 1990 elections. Many armed forces personnel, even now, have similar pre-disposition towards the SPDC regime. There is also a sense of unhappiness amongst some personnel over Myanmar's proximity to China in defence and other sensitive areas.

CONCLUSION

Consequent to Myanmar's admission into the ASEAN in 1997, the country is increasingly becoming extroverted. The Chinese influence in Myanmar is undoubtedly pervasive, however despite, pressing economic and political imperatives, Myanmar has stopped short of providing China with any kind of permanent presence. The ASEAN has allowed Myanmar the much needed maneuver space in the international arena. It is beginning to look confident and is reaching out to all its neighbours including India. Going by the number of interactions in the last four years, it appears that India-Myanmar relationship is poised to enter into a new era. The complementarities between the two countries are far too many to be ignored.