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It Takes Two to Tango: The Delicate Dance between India and Burma

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Renaud Egreteau, Research Assistant Professor at the University of Hong Kong, notes that for internally and externally generated reasons, New Delhi would like to foster closer relations with Burma, however difficult and discomfiting it may be. “As such, India’s new Burma policy must be different from the Western sanctions-led approach, but it should also be better than the predatory arrangements imposed by Asian powers that seek to capture Burma’s natural assets but leave behind few tangible benefits for the Burmese people.”

India’s decision to welcome Senior General Than Shwe, the head of the Burmese junta, in late July 2010 might have exhibited all the radiance of a reinvigorated relationship, but careful consideration of what exactly New Delhi has fostered with its eastern neighbor will reveal that Indo-Burmese relations remain uneasy. Despite enduring sympathies for Burma’s pro-democracy stirrings since 1988, India is now convinced that it must engage Burma for strategic reasons. However, the engagement with Burma’s praetorian leaders is simply not as constructive as often claimed. Furthermore, New Delhi seems divided over the issue of how exactly to engage Burma, and as a result has unintentionally abdicated the evolution of bilateral relations to Naypyidaw’s whims. If it wants to strengthen its leverage, including its democratizing influence over Burma, India needs to reassess its current policy and emerge with a formidable but actionable vision to obtain that goal. As such, India’s new Burma policy must be different from the Western sanctions-led approach, but it should also be better than the predatory arrangements imposed by Asian powers that seek to capture Burma’s natural assets but leave behind few tangible benefits for the Burmese people.

From New Delhi’s perspective, the rationale behind courting Naypyidaw is convincingly logical. Internally and externally generated considerations make it hard for India to avoid dealing with neighboring, resource-rich Burma. Cultivating close relations with Burma, with which the Indian Northeast shares a porous 1,643-km-long border, makes sense especially when indigenous ethnic insurgencies still plague that region of India. Moreover, China has successfully penetrated Burma and gained credible, if limited, access to its natural resources and market. In consequence, India has opted for cautious but direct engagement with Burma, while Indian pundits have stressed the imperative that such a policy be imbued with realism. A Burma policy that meets India’s national interests would consolidate its presence in a neighboring country where the West is largely absent, check Chinese advances toward the Indian Ocean, and discreetly provide the repressed Burmese links to the outside world.

Yet, the consequences of India’s current policy remain ambiguous at best. Not only is its strategic footprint in Burma less substantial than expected, but India’s access to the Burmese people is also questionable. While India can now attain Burma’s little-tapped natural resources, an annual bilateral trade of US\$1 billion—less than the annual trade between India and Poland—is dismally small for two neighboring countries, especially when the unbalanced trade, which favors Burma five-to-one, focuses on only three sectors: hydrocarbons, pharmaceuticals, and beans and pulses. Furthermore, despite India’s financial support for the construction of infrastructures in Burma, the development projects are located in remote and underpopulated areas, thus reducing their impact on local Burmese communities.



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Additionally, while closer cooperation between the Indian and the Burmese security forces may have indeed weakened the anti-Indian insurgencies that emanate out of western Burma, local Burmese authorities will likely continue to value strategically important links to the insurgents. Lastly, even if Naypyidaw provides reassurance to New Delhi about far-fetched Chinese military presence in Burma, the capacity of the Indian leadership to influence its Burmese counterparts remains woefully limited.

Unfortunately, few alternative policies are available for New Delhi. India cannot return to its ineffective megaphone opposition of 1988 or afford to align with faraway Western countries that have no immediate interests in Burma. While BJP- and Congress-led governments have evidently considered an array of policy options, contrasting interests in the government structure inhibit a reformulation of India's Burma policy. The Indian military, the Ministry of Energy, and business circles in India push for more cooperation with Naypyidaw because they sense opportunities in a Burma where Western sanctions proscribe Western—but not necessarily Asian—presence. However, Indian intelligence services prize the politic cultivation of ties with Burmese exiles, while security circles in the Indian Northeast are wary of weakening their role as India's bulwark against China. Moreover, discomfited Indian diplomats who are sensitive to Burma's Indophobic history are averse to a closer embrace.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that it takes two to tango. Thanks to its calculated strategy, Naypyidaw clearly leads the delicate dance between India and Burma now. Increasingly more confident and cognizant of its interests and abilities, Burma has deftly maneuvered its foreign policy in an environment that it found difficult to navigate fifteen years ago, with only Chinese and ASEAN diplomatic options at hand. Since 2004, the courting of India has become a component of Burma's adroit policy of “isolationism without isolation.”

For Naypyidaw, India does not in fact loom as large as imagined. Given its colonial traumatic legacies, Burma has never been enthusiastic about wholly embracing India's eastward projection, only to the extent that it suits Burma's immediate interests and adequately counterbalances pressure from China, Thailand, and the West. Despite Than Shwe's second visit to India in less than six years, no pro-India faction has emerged in the Burmese military; the country's strategic vision remains firmly in the hands of nationalists who have developed an acute understanding of Burma's geopolitical position and strengths. Thus, India's role in Burmese isolationist policy stems from the fact that its links with Burma help preclude Naypyidaw's complete international isolation. Indeed, India offers Burma less diplomatic significance than Russia, which wields veto power at the United Nations, less financial importance than Singapore, and less geopolitical gravity than neighboring China.

Given Burma's nationalist inheritance, no Burma watcher can be certain that an Indian engagement policy that focuses on the different layers of Burmese society and the country's emerging civil society—rather than exclusively dealing with the junta on energy and security issues—will increase India's influence over its eastern neighbor. Nevertheless, such an engagement led by India's vibrant civil society, health, and humanitarian groups would afford New Delhi a more meaningful position and an opportunity to be present deep inside Burma, where neither China nor the West, including the United States, will be in the coming decade.