Viewing cable 05NEWDELHI9080, GOI "CONSTRUCTIVELY ENGAGED" IN BURMA, UPBEAT ON

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 009080

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM PTER BG BM IN SA
SUBJECT: GOI "CONSTRUCTIVELY ENGAGED" IN BURMA, UPBEAT ON BANGLADESH

Classified By: PolCouns Geoffrey Pyatt for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: MEA J/S (Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar) Mohan Kumar was candid about India's need to continue engaging in Burma and optimistic that PM Singh had begun to "clear the air" during his bilateral meeting with President Zia in Bangladesh. Acknowledging Indian competition with the Chinese presence in Burma, Kumar characterized the evolving relationship as "constructive engagement." Kumar was equally puzzled about the recent relocation of Burma's capital, but offered Indian theories on the move, including fears of intelligence penetration in Rangoon or a power battle between State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) Chairman Than Shwe and Vice-Chairman Maung Aye. Regarding the November 12 bilateral meeting between PM Singh and President Zia on the sidelines of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit, Kumar told us that most important result of the meeting was to "clear the air" between the heads of state. The two leaders did not cover much substantive ground, he reported, but the Indian PM had stressed that he and Zia should "cut through the red tape" together when problems between Delhi and Dhaka arise. End Summary.

Burmese Engagement: Constructive or Just Competitive?

¶2. (C) In a November 23 meeting on regional issues, Joint Secretary for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar Mohan Kumar

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was open about India's need to compete with Chinese presence in Burma and characterized Delhi's growing ties with Rangoon (and now Pyinmana), as "constructive engagement." To counter

Chinese influence in Burma, "India needs to be there," he postured, and this provides an added incentive for GOI infrastructure projects throughout the country. In response to PolCouns' hope that India is using its relationship to lead Burma in a direction which reflects our common values, Kumar commented that "India does raise these (democracy) issues." However, he observed that it is difficult to tell how their Burmese counterparts respond to these statements, since they tend to "read from a script" at meetings and are clearly worried about saying anything out of line.

¶3. (C) Kumar offered several theories on the recent relocation of the Burmese capital, arguing that it was the work of a schizophrenic leader rather than a further sign of regime hardening. After joking that the move was taken in response to fears of a US invasion, he compared it to the ancient Mughal ruler Tughlak's equally unpopular relocation of the Indian capital. He commented that there was no good explanation, but offered two theories. Either Chairman Than Shwe was worried that Rangoon had been "penetrated" or the SPDC leader was embroiled in a battle with Vice-Chairman Maung Aye. He repeated a rumor that Aye had protested the bizarre idea of relocating the capital, which served as a "trigger to move." He rejected the theory that it was a further sign of hardening in Burma, and described it as the work of a "paranoid" leader in an "act of desperation."

PM Singh "Clears the Air" in Dhaka

¶4. (C) Turning to Prime Minister Singh's November 12 bilateral meeting with Bangladeshi President Khaleda Zia on the sidelines of the SAARC Summit, Kumar was optimistic that the meeting would further New Delhi's campaign for increased high-level contact with Dhaka. Singh and Zia had a "very pleasant" meeting for about twenty-five minutes, but "did not cover much substantive ground." During the meeting, the Indian PM stressed the importance of good bilateral relations by promising that he would personally "cut through the bureaucratic red tape together" to solve any disputes between the two neighbors. Most significantly, it was "positive that high level contacts with Bangladesh had been initiated and sustained." He hoped this meeting would begin to repair the damage left by hurt feelings over India's decision to cancel the February 2005 SAARC Summit.

Comment: India Getting Practical With Tough Neighbors

¶5. (C) What was striking about Kumar's comments was the GOI's practical take on how to manage relations to the east. Rather than squabbling over its inability to get tangible results from Zia or decrying the negative effects of Chinese presence in Burma, India is rolling up its sleeves and looking for practical ways to further its interests. MEA is still hopeful that sustained, high-level contacts with Dhaka will eventually elicit better communication and cooperation. In Burma, its engagement has produced arrangements on infrastructure, energy security and anti-insurgency

cooperation. We will continue to urge the GOI also to use its influence to emphasize human rights and encourage Burma in the right direction.

¶6. (U) Visit New Delhi's Classified Website: (http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/sa/newdelhi/)
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http://www.wikileaks.ch/cable/2005/12/05NEWDELHI9080.html