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Embracing Myanmar: India's Foreign Policy Realism

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India's constructive engagement with Myanmar has reached a new intensity with its hosting of Senior General Than Shwe for five days at the end of July. Delhi's strong imperatives on counter-terror cooperation, border management, resource security, and overland transit routes mean there is no incentive at all for Delhi to elevate ideology above national interest in its policy towards Myanmar.

INDIA'S DECISION to embrace Myanmar's Senior General Than Shwe — recently dubbed as one of the world's worst dictators by Washington's *Foreign Policy* magazine — has drawn much criticism from the West. In hosting Gen. Than Shwe for a five-day visit at the end of July, India would seem to have drifted a bit too far even by its new standards of realpolitik.

India's Growing Tribe of Realists

Having been at the receiving end of Western pressures to engage Pakistan's military rulers in the past, India's foreign policy establishment is not impressed with the argument that nations should not engage repressive regimes. Delhi's growing tribe of foreign policy realists argues that the United States, with all its power, has not been able to make democracy promotion a consistent element in its foreign policy. If Washington had to continually trade its political values in the pursuit of larger national interests, for example in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, Delhi has an enduring political imperative to engage its neighbours, irrespective of their internal political orientation.

In Delhi no other political consideration can outweigh a simple geographical fact — that India shares a long land frontier with Myanmar that runs a little longer than 1600 km. With turbulent minorities on either side of the border, many of them engaged in armed insurgencies for decades, India and Myanmar have expanded cooperation between their security forces since the mid-1990s. If security is an important element of border management, so is the economic development of their shared frontiers. At the end of Than Shwe's visit, India agreed to invest more in road links between the two border

regions and promote local as well as regional trade.

Much like Beijing which has developed infrastructure in the regions of Myanmar bordering China's Yunnan province, Delhi wants to develop transport corridors linking its remote North Eastern provinces with cities in Myanmar. During the Myanmar leader's visit, India announced grants and loans totaling close to US\$ 250 million to build new roads and modernise the old rail network in Myanmar.

India's Land-Bridge to Southeast Asia

That India sees Myanmar as a natural land-bridge between itself and Southeast Asia is well known. Delhi has agreed to develop road and rail networks, some in collaboration with Southeast Asian countries, to link India to the South China Sea through Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. While those trans-regional projects might take up a long time to materialise, India has given priority to connecting its mainland with the remote provinces of the North-East through the territory of Myanmar.

Currently goods from India move to the North East through a narrow corridor called the 'chicken's neck' just above the northern tip of Bangladesh. Ideally transit arrangements through Bangladesh would be the best way of linking India with its own North Eastern provinces. Delhi and Dhaka, however, are some distance away from negotiating comprehensive arrangements for overland trade and transit.

Meanwhile India has sought a shorter multimodal transport corridor into the North-East through Myanmar. When completed, this project will allow India to ship goods from Kolkata to the Sittwe port on Myanmar's Arakan coast. From there the goods will move up the Kaladan river and then by road to the state of Mizoram in the North-East. This involves upgrading the port facility at Sittwe, dredging the Kaladan river to make it navigable and roads across the border.

Myanmar also offers many natural resources that are so vital for the sustained economic growth of India, which has emerged as the second fastest growing economy after China. Given its world wide quest for energy and mineral resources for an economy that is growing at about 8 per cent, it is not surprising that Indian companies are actively participating in the exploration and exploitation of oil and other natural resources in Myanmar. Indian industry, until recently cautious about the Myanmar market, has begun to look for major manufacturing opportunities. One of India's leading industrial houses, the Tatas, is all set to start production of heavy trucks in Myanmar.

Than Shwe's Wooing of India, China

Gen. Than Shwe, who visited the Tata facilities at Jamshedpur in eastern India, is welcoming other Indian groups to take advantage Myanmar's abundant natural resources and cheap labour. India's diplomatic outreach to Myanmar is seen widely in terms of a rivalry with China. While Delhi does seek to compete with Beijing for influence in Myanmar, the ground reality could be quite different from this assessment.

Take for example the fact that Indian companies own nearly 18 per cent of a gas field off the Arakan coast that will feed the Chinese pipeline to Kunming in Yunnan that is now under construction. Meanwhile, the idea of joint development projects in third countries has begun to enter the official dialogue between India and China. Myanmar may well present the first theatre where Delhi and Beijing could take up joint economic, energy and transportation ventures.

Myanmar offers the land-locked regions of India and China natural gateways to the open seas and international markets. It also holds the key to managing the vital border lands of the two Asian giants. Delhi and Beijing, despite their very different political systems, have similar and growing stakes in

Myanmar's political stability and economic development. That, in turn, gives Myanmar's generals the space and time to fob off external pressures for internal change.

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